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The World's Classics

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SELECTED POLISH TALES

SELECTED
POLISH TALES

TRANSLATED BY

ELSE C. M. BENECKE

AND

MARIE BUSCH

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CONTENTS

	PAGE
PREFACE	vii
THE OUTPOST. By BOLESŁAW PRUS	1
A PINCH OF SALT. By ADAM SZYMÁNSKI	227
KOWALSKI THE CARPENTER. By ADAM SZYMÁNSKI	239
FOREBODINGS. By STEFAN ŻEROMSKI	261
A POLISH SCENE. By WŁADYSŁAW ST. REYMONT	269
DEATH. By WŁADYSŁAW ST. REYMONT	282
THE SENTENCE. By J. KADEN-BANDROWSKI	307
'P. P. C.' By MME RYGIER-NAŁKOWSKA	339

PREFACE

My friend the late Miss Else C. M. Benecke left a number of Polish stories in rough translation, and I am carrying out her wishes in editing them and handing them over to English readers. In spite of failing health during the last years of her life, she worked hard at translations from this beautiful but difficult language, and the two volumes, *Tales by Polish Authors* and *More Tales by Polish Authors*, published by Mr. Basil Blackwell at Oxford, were among the first attempts to make modern Polish fiction known in this country. In both these volumes I collaborated with her.

England is fortunate in counting Joseph Conrad among her own novelists; although a Pole by birth he is one of the greatest masters of English style. The Polish authors who have written in their own language have perhaps been most successful in the short story. Often it is so slight that it can hardly be called a story, but each of these sketches conveys a distinct atmosphere of the country and the people, and shows the individuality of each writer. The unhappy state of Poland for more than 150 years has placed political and social problems in the foreground of Polish literature. Writers are therefore judged

and appraised by their fellow-countrymen as much by their patriotism as by their literary and artistic merits.

Of the authors whose work is presented in this volume *Prus* (Aleksander Głowacki), the veteran of modern Polish novelists, is the one most loved by his own countrymen. His books are written partly with a moral object, as each deals with a social evil. But while he exposes the evil, his warm heart and strong sense of justice—combined with a sense of humour—make him fair and even generous to all.

The poignant appeal of *Szymánski's* stories lies in the fact that they are based on personal experiences. He was banished to Yakutsk in Siberia for six years when he was quite a young man and had barely finished his studies at the University of Warsaw, at a time when every profession of radicalism, however moderate, was punished severely by the Russian authorities. He died, a middle-aged man, during the War, after many years of literary and journalistic activity in the interest of his country. Neither he nor Prus lived to see Poland free and republican, an ideal for which they had striven.

Żeromski is a writer of intense feeling. If Prus's kindly and simple tales are the most beloved, Żeromski's more subtle psychological treatment of his subjects is the most admired, and he is said to

mark an epoch in Polish fiction. In the two short sketches contained in this volume, as well as in most of his short stories and longer novels, the dominant note is human suffering.

Reymont, who is a more impersonal writer and more detached from his subject, is perhaps the most artistic among the authors of short stories. His volume entitled *Peasants*, from which the two sketches in this collection are taken, gives very powerful and realistic pictures of life in the villages.

Kaden-Bandrowski is a very favourite author in his own country, as many of his short stories deal with Polish life during the Great War. In the early part of the War he joined the Polish Legions which formed the nucleus of Pilsudski's army, and shared their varying fortunes. During the greater part of this time he edited a radical newspaper for his soldiers, in whom he took a great interest. The story, *The Sentence*, was translated by me from a French translation kindly made by the author.

Mme *Rygier-Nałkowska*, who, with Kaden-Bandrowski, belongs to the youngest group of Polish writers, is a strong feminist of courageous views, and a keen satirist of certain national and social conventions. The present volume only contains a short sketch—a personal experience of hers during the early part of the War. It would be considered a very daring thing for a Polish

lady to venture voluntarily into the zone of the Russian army, but her little sketch shows the individual Russian to be as human as any other soldier. This sketch and the first of Reymont's have been translated by Mr. Joseph Solomon, whose knowledge of Slavonic languages makes him a most valuable co-operator.

My share in the work has been to put Miss Benecke's literal translation into a form suitable for publication, and to get into touch with the authors or their representatives, to whom I would now tender my grateful thanks for their courteous permission to issue this volume, viz. to Mme Głowacka, widow of ' Prus ', to the sons of the late Mr. Szymánski, to MM. Żeromski, Reymont, Kaden-Bandrowski, and to Mme Rygier-Nałkowska, all of Warsaw.

MARIE BUSCH.

THE OUTPOST

BY

BOLESŁAW PRUS

(Aleksander Głowacki)

CHAPTER I

The river Bialka springs from under a hill no bigger than a cottage; the water murmurs in its little hollow like a swarm of bees getting ready for their flight.

For the distance of fifteen miles the Bialka flows on level ground. Woods, villages, trees in the fields, crucifixes by the roadside show up clearly and become smaller and smaller as they recede into the distance. It is a bit of country like a round table on which human beings live like a butterfly covered by a blue flower. What man finds and what another leaves him he may eat, but he must not go too far or fly too high.

Fifteen to twenty miles farther to the south the country begins to change. The shallow banks of the Bialka rise and retreat from each other, the flat fields become undulating, the path leads ever more frequently and steeply up and down hill.

The plain has disappeared and given place to a ravine; you are surrounded by hills of the height of a many-storied house; all are covered with bushes; sometimes the ascent is steep, sometimes

gradual. The first ravine leads into a second, wilder and narrower, thence into a succession of nine or ten. Cold and dampness cling to you when you walk through them; you climb one of the hills and find yourself surrounded by a network of forking and winding ravines.

A short distance from the river-banks the landscape is again quite different. The hills grow smaller and stand separate like great ant-hills. You have emerged from the country of ravines into the broad valley of the Bialka, and the bright sun shines full into your eyes.

If the earth is a table on which Providence has spread a banquet for creation, then the valley of the Bialka is a gigantic, long-shaped dish with upturned rim. In the winter this dish is white, but at other seasons it is like majolica, with forms severe and irregular, but beautiful. The Divine Potter has placed a field at the bottom of the dish and cut it through from north to south with the ribbon of the Bialka sparkling with waves of sapphire blue in the morning, crimson in the evening, golden at midday, and silver in moonlit nights.

When He had formed the bottom, the Great Potter shaped the rim, taking care that each side should possess an individual physiognomy.

The west bank is wild; the field touches the steep gravel hills, where a few scattered hawthorn bushes and dwarf birches grow. Patches of earth show here and there, as though the turf had been peeled. Even the hardiest plants eschew these patches, where instead of vegetation the surface presents clay and strata of sand, or else rock showing its teeth to the green field.

The east bank has a totally different character; it forms an amphitheatre with three tiers. The first tier above the field is of mould and contains a row of cottages surrounded by trees: this is the village. On the second tier, where the ground is clay, stands the manor-house, almost on top of the village, with which an avenue of old lime-trees connects it. To the right and left extend the manor-fields, large and rectangular, sown with wheat, rye, and peas, or else lying fallow. The sandy soil of the third tier is sown with rye or oats and fringed by the pine-forest, its contours showing black against the sky.

The northern ridge contains little hills standing singly. One of them is the highest in the neighbourhood and is crowned by a solitary pine. This hill, together with two others, is the property of the gospodarz [1] Josef Slimak.

The gospodarstwo is like a hermitage; it is a long way from the village and still farther from the manor-house.

Slimak's cottage is by the roadside, the front door opening on to the road, the back door into the yard; the cowhouse and pigsty are under one roof, the barn, stable, and cart-shed forming the other three sides of the square courtyard.

The peasants chaff Slimak for living in exile like a Sibiriak.[2] It is true, they say, that he lives

[1] *Gospodarz:* the owner of a small holding, as distinct from the villager, who owns no land and is simply an agricultural labourer. The word, which means host, master of the house, will be used throughout the book.

Gospodyni: hostess, mistress of the holding.

Gospodarstwo: the property.

[2] *Sibiriak:* a person of European birth or extraction, living in Siberia.

nearer to the church, but on the other hand he has no one to open his mouth to.

However, his solitude is not complete. On a warm autumn day, when the white-coated gospodarz is ploughing on the hill with a pair of horses, you can see his wife and a girl, both in red petticoats, digging up potatoes.

Between the hills the thirteen-year-old Jendrek[1] minds the cows and performs strange antics meanwhile to amuse himself. If you look more closely you will also find the eight-year-old Stasiek[2] with hair as white as flax, who roams through the ravines or sits under the lonely pine on the hill and looks thoughtfully into the valley.

That gospodarstwo—a drop in the sea of human interest—was a small world in itself which had gone through various phases and had a history of its own.

For instance, there was the time when Josef Slimak had scarcely seven acres of land and only his wife in the cottage. Then there came two surprises, his wife bore him a son—Jendrek,—and as the result of the servituty[3] his holding was increased by three acres.

Both these circumstances created a great change in the gospodarz's life; he bought another cow and pig and occasionally hired a labourer.

[1] Polish spelling, *Jędrek* (pronounced as given, Jendrek, with the French sound of *en*): Andrew.

[2] *Stasiek:* diminutive of Stanislas.

[3] *Servituty* are pieces of land which, on the abolition of serfdom, the landowners had to cede to the peasants formerly their serfs. The settlement was left to the discretion of the owners, and much bargaining and discontent on both sides resulted therefrom; the peasants had to pay percentage either in labour or in produce to the landowner.

Some years later his second son, Stasiek, was born. Then Slimakowa[1] hired a woman by way of an experiment for half a year to help her with the work.

Sobieska stayed for nine months, then one night she escaped to the village, her longing for the public-house having become too strong. Her place was taken by 'Silly Zoska'[2] for another six months. Slimakowa was always hoping that the work would grow less, and she would be able to dispense with a servant. However, 'Silly Zoska' stayed for six years, and when she went into service at the manor the work at the cottage had not grown less. So the gospodyni engaged a fifteen-year-old orphan, Magda, who preferred to go into service, although she had a cow, a bit of land, and half a cottage of her own. She said that her uncle beat her too much, and that her other relations only offered her the cold comfort that the more he applied the stick the better it would be for her.

Up till then Slimak had chiefly done his own farm work and rarely hired a labourer. This still left him time to go to work at the manor with his horses, or to carry goods from the town for the Jews.

When, however, he was summoned more and more often to the manor, he found that the day-labourer was not sufficient, and began to look out for a permanent farm-hand.

One autumn day, after his wife had been rating him severely for not yet having found a farm-hand, it chanced that Maciek Owczarz,[3] whose foot

[1] *Slimakowa :* Polish form for Mrs. Slimak.

[2] *Zoska :* diminutive of Sophia.

[3] Pronunciation approximately : Ovcharge. *Maciek* (pron. Machik) : Matthew.

had been crushed under a cart, came out of the hospital. The lame man's road led him past Slimak's cottage; tired and miserable he sat down on a stone by the gate and looked longingly into the entrance. The gospodyni was boiling potatoes for the pigs, and the smell was so good, as the little puffs of steam spread along the highroad, that it went into the very pit of Maciek's stomach. He sat there in fascination, unable to move.

'Is that you, Owczarz?' Slimakowa asked, hardly recognizing the poor wretch in his rags.

'Indeed, it is I,' the man answered miserably.

'They said in the village that you had been killed.'

'I have been worse off than that; I have been in the hospital. I wish I had been left under the cart, I shouldn't be so hungry now.'

The gospodyni became thoughtful.

'If only one could be sure that you wouldn't die, you could stay here as our farm-hand.'

The poor fellow jumped up from his seat and walked to the door, dragging his foot.

'Why should I die?' he cried, 'I am quite well, and when I have a bit to eat I can do the work of two. Give me barszcz[1] and I will chop up a cartload of wood for you. Try me for a week, and I will plough all those fields. I will serve you for old clothes and patched boots, so long as I have a shelter for the winter.'

Here Maciek paused, astonished at himself for having said so much, for he was silent by nature.

[1] Pronunciation approximately: barsht. The national dish of the peasants; it is made with beetroot and bread, tastes slightly sour, and is said to be delicious.

Slimakowa looked him up and down, gave him a bowl of barszcz and another of potatoes, and told him to wash in the river. When her husband came home in the evening Maciek was introduced to him as the farm-hand who had already chopped wood and fed the cattle.

Slimak listened in silence. As he was tender-hearted he said, after a pause :

' Well, stay with us, good man. It will be better for us and better for you. And if ever—God grant that may not happen—there should be no bread in the cottage at all, then you will be no worse off than you are to-day. Rest, and you will set about your work all right.'

Thus it came about that this new inmate was received into the cottage. He was quiet as a mouse, faithful as a dog, and industrious as a pair of horses, in spite of his lameness.

After that, with the exception of the yellow dog Burek, no additions were made to Slimak's household, neither children nor servants nor property. Life at the gospodarstwo went with perfect regularity. All the labour, anxiety, and hopes of these human beings centred in the one aim : daily bread. For this the girl carried in the firewood, or, singing and jumping, ran to the pit for potatoes. For this the gospodyni milked the cows at daybreak, baked bread, and moved her saucepans on and off the fire. For this Maciek, perspiring, dragged his lame leg after the plough and harrow, and Slimak, murmuring his morning-prayers, went at dawn to the manor-barn or drove into the town to deliver the corn which he had sold to the Jews.

For the same reason they worried when there

was not enough snow on the rye in winter, or when they could not get enough fodder for the cattle; or prayed for rain in May and for fine weather at the end of June. On this account they would calculate after the harvest how much corn they would get out of a korzec,[1] and what prices it would fetch. Like bees round a hive their thoughts swarmed round the question of daily bread. They never moved far from this subject, and to leave it aside altogether was impossible. They even said with pride that, as gentlemen were in the world to enjoy themselves and to order people about, so peasants existed for the purpose of feeding themselves and others.

CHAPTER II

It was April. After their dinner Slimak's household dispersed to their different occupations. The gospodyni, tying a red handkerchief round her head and a white linen one round her neck, ran down to the river. Stasiek followed her, looking at the clouds and observing to himself that they were different every day. Magda busied herself washing up the dinner things, singing 'Oh, da, da', louder and louder in proportion as the mistress went farther away. Jendrek began pushing Magda about, pulling the dog's tail and whistling penetratingly; finally he ran out with a spade into the orchard. Slimak sat by the stove. He was a man of medium height with a broad chest and powerful shoulders. He had a calm face,

[1] A *korzec* is twelve hundred sheaves.

short moustache, and thick straight hair falling abundantly over his forehead and on to his neck. A red-glass stud set in brass shone in his sacking shirt. He rested the elbow of his left arm on his right fist and smoked a pipe, but when his eyes closed and his head fell too far forward, he righted himself and rested his right elbow on his left fist. He puffed out the grey smoke and dozed alternately, spitting now and then into the middle of the room or shifting his hands. When the pipe-stem began to twitter like a young sparrow, he knocked the bowl a few times against the bench, emptied the ashes, and poked his finger down. Yawning, he got up and laid the pipe on the shelf.

He glanced under his brows at Magda and shrugged his shoulders. The liveliness of the girl who skipped about while she was washing her dishes, roused a contemptuous compassion in him. He knew well what it felt like to have no desire for skipping about, and how great the weight of a man's head, hands, and feet can be when he has been hard at work.

He put on his thick hobnailed boots and a stiff sukmana,[1] fastened a hard strap round his waist, and put on his high sheepskin cap. The heaviness in his limbs increased, and it came into his mind that it would be more suitable to be buried in a bundle of straw after a huge bowl of peeled barley-soup and another of cheese dumplings, than to go to work. But he put this thought aside, and went out slowly into the yard. In his snuff-coloured sukmana and black cap he looked like the stem of a pine, burnt at the top.

[1] *Sukmana*, a long linen coat, often elaborately embroidered.

The barn door was open, and by sheer perversity some bundles of straw were peeping out, luring Slimak to a doze. But he turned away his head and looked at one of the hills where he had sown oats that morning. He fancied the yellow grain in the furrows was looking frightened, as if trying in vain to hide from the sparrows that were picking it up.

'You will eat me up altogether,' Slimak muttered. With heavy steps he approached the shed, took out the two harrows, and led the chestnuts out of the stable; one was yawning and the other moved his lips, looking at Slimak and blinking his eyes, as if he thought: 'Would you not prefer to doze and not to drag us up the hill? Didn't we do enough work for you yesterday?' Slimak nodded, as if in answer, and drove off.

Seen from below, the thick-set man and the horses with heads hanging down, seemed to harrow the blue sky, moving a few hundred paces backward and forward. As often as they reached the edge of the sown field, a flight of sparrows rose up, twittering angrily, and flew over them like a cloud, then settled at the other end, shrieking continually in astonishment that earth should be poured on to such lovely grain.

'Silly fool! Silly fool! What a silly fool!' they cried.

'Bah!' murmured Slimak, cracking his whip at them, 'if I listened to you idlers, you and I would both starve under the fence. The beggars are playing the deuce here!'

Certainly Slimak got little encouragement in his labour. Not only that the sparrows noisily criticized his work, and the chestnuts scornfully whisked their tails under his nose, but the harrows

also objected, and resisted at every little stone or clod of earth. The tired horses continually stumbled, and when Slimak cried 'Woa, my lads!' and they went on, the harrows again resisted and pulled them back. When the worried harrows moved on for a bit, stones got into the horses' feet or under his own shoes, or choked up, and even broke the teeth of the harrows. Even the ungrateful earth offered resistance.

'You are worse than a pig!' the man said angrily. 'If I took to scratching a pig's back with a horsecomb, it would lie down quietly and grunt with gratitude. But you are always bristling, as if I did you an injury!'

The sun took up the affronted earth's cause, and threw a great sheaf of light across the ashen-coloured field, where dark and yellow patches were visible.

'Look at that black patch,' said the sun, 'the hill was all black like that when your father sowed wheat on it. And now look at the yellow patch where the stony ground comes out from under the mould and will soon possess all your land.'

'But that is not my fault,' said Slimak.

'Not your fault?' whispered the earth; 'you yourself eat three times a day, but how often do you feed me? It is much if it is once in eight years. And then you think you give me a great deal, but a dog would starve on such fare. You know that you always grudge me the manure, shame on you!'

The penitent peasant hung his head.

'And you sleep twice in twenty-four hours unless your wife drives you to work, but how much rest do you give me? Once in ten years, and then

your cattle trample upon me. So I am to be content with being harrowed? Just try giving no hay or litter to your cows, only scratch them and see whether they will give you milk. They will get ill, the slaughterer will have to be sent for, and even the Jew will give you nothing for their hides.'

'Oh dear, oh dear!' sighed the peasant, acknowledging that the earth was right. But no one pitied or comforted him—on the contrary! The west wind rose, and twining itself among the dry stalks on the field-paths, whistled:

'Look sharp, you'll catch it! I will bring such a deluge of rain that the remainder of the mould will be spurted on to the highroad or into the manor-fields. And though you should harrow with your own teeth, you shall get less and less comfort every year! I will make everything sterile!'

The wind was not threatening in vain. In Slimak's father's time ten korzy of sheaves an acre had been harvested here. Now he had to be thankful for seven, and what was going to happen in the future?

'That's a peasant's lot,' murmured Slimak, 'work, work, work, and from one difficulty you get into another. If only it could be otherwise, if only I could manage to have another cow and perhaps get that little meadow. . . .'

His whip was pointed at the green field by the Bialka.

But the sparrows only twittered 'You fool!' and the earth groaned: 'You are starving me!'

He stopped the horses and looked around him to divert his thoughts.

Jendrek was digging between the cottage and

the highroad, throwing stones at the birds now and then or singing out of tune :

'God grant you, God grant you
That I may not find you,
For else, my fair maid,
You should open your gate.'

And Magda answered from within :

'Although I am poor
And my mother was poor,
I 'll not at the gate
Kiss you early or late.'

Slimak turned towards the river where his wife could be plainly seen in her white chemise and red skirt, bending over the water and beating the linen with a stick until the valley rang. Stasiek had already strayed farther towards the ravines. Sometimes he knelt down on the bank and gazed into the river, supported on his elbows. Slimak smiled.

'Peering again! What does he see down there?' he whispered.

Stasiek was his favourite, and struck him as an unusual child, who could see things that others did not see.

While Slimak cracked his whip and the horses went on, his thoughts were travelling in the direction of the desired field.

'How much land have I got?' he meditated, 'ten acres; if I had only sown six or seven every year and let the rest lie fallow, how could I have fed my hungry family? And the man, he eats as much as I do, though he is lame; and he has fifteen roubles wages besides. Magda eats less, but then she is lazy enough to make a dog howl. I'm lucky when they want me for work at the manor, or if

a Jewess hires my horses to go for a drive, or my wife sells butter and eggs. And what is there saved when all is said and done? Perhaps fifty roubles in the whole year. When we were first married, a hundred did not astonish me. Manure the ground indeed! Let the squire take it into his head not to employ me, or not to sell me fodder, what then? I should have to drive the cattle to market and die of hunger.

'I am not as well off as Gryb or Lukasiak or Sarnecki. They live like gentlemen. One drives to church with his wife, the other wears a cap like a burgher, and the third would like to turn out the Wojt [1] and wear the chain himself. But I have to say to myself, 'Be poor on ten acres and go and bow and scrape to the bailiff at the manor that he may remember you. Well, let it be as it is! Better be master on a square yard of your own than a beggar on another's large estate.' A cloud of dust was rising on the high-road beyond the river. Some one was coming towards the bridge from the manor-house, riding in a peculiar fashion. The wind blew from behind, but the dust was so thick that sometimes it travelled backwards. Occasionally horse and rider showed above it, but the next moment it whirled round and round them again, as if the road was raising a storm. Slimak shaded his eyes with his hand.

The designations *Wojt* and *Soltys* are derived from the German *Vogt* and *Schultheiss*. Their functions in the townships or villages are of a different kind; in small villages there may be only one of these functionaries, the Soltys. He is the representative of the Government, collects rates and taxes and requisitions horses for the army. The Wojt is head of the village, and magistrate. All legal matters would be referred to him.

'What an odd way of riding? who can it be? not the squire, nor his coachman. He can't be a Catholic, not even a Jew; for although a Jew would bob up and down on the horse as he does, he would never make a horse go in that reckless way. It must be some crazy stranger.'

The rider had now come near enough for Slimak to see what he was like. He was slim and dressed in gentleman's clothes, consisting of a light suit and velvet jockey cap. He had eyeglasses on his nose and a cigar in his mouth, and he was carrying his riding whip under his arm, holding the reins in both hands between the horse's neck and his own beard, while he was shaking violently up and down; he hugged the saddle so tightly with his bow legs that his trousers were rucked up, showing his calves.

Anyone in the very least acquainted with equestrian matters could guess that this was the first time the rider had sat upon a horse, or that the horse had carried such a rider. At moments they seemed to be ambling along harmoniously, until the bobbing cavalier would lose his balance and tug at the reins; then the horse, which had a soft mouth, would turn sideways or stand still; the rider would then smack his lips, and if this had no effect he would fumble for the whip. The horse, guessing what was required, would start again, shaking him up and down until he looked like a rag doll badly sewn together.

All this did not upset his temper, for indeed, this was the first time the rider had realized the dearest wish of a lifetime, and he was enjoying himself to the full.

Sometimes the quiet but desperate horse would

break into a gallop. Then the rider, keeping his balance by a miracle, would drop his bridle-fantasias and imagine himself a cavalry captain riding to the attack at the head of his squadron, until, unaccustomed to his rank of officer, he would perform some unexpected movement which made the horse suddenly stand still again, and would cause the gallant captain to hit his nose or his cigar against the neck of his steed.

He was, moreover, a democratic gentleman. When the horse took a fancy to trot towards the village instead of towards the bridge, a crowd of dogs and children ran after him with every sign of pleasure. Instead of annoyance a benevolent enjoyment would then take possession of him, for next to riding exercise he passionately loved the people, because they could manage horses. After a while, however, his rôle of cavalry captain would please him more, and after further performances with the reins, he succeeded in turning back towards the bridge. He evidently intended to ride through the length and breadth of the valley.

Slimak was still watching him.

'Eh, that must be the squire's brother-in-law, who was expected from Warsaw,' he said to himself, much amused; 'our squire chose a gracious little wife, and was not even very long about it; but he might have searched the length of the world for a brother-in-law like that! A bear would be a commoner sight in these parts than a man sitting a horse as he does! He looks as stupid as a cowherd—still, he is the squire's brother-in-law.'

While Slimak was thus taking the measure of this friend of the people, the latter had reached the

bridge; the noise of Slimakowa's stick had attracted his attention. He turned the horse towards the bridge-rail and craned his neck over the water; indeed, his slim figure and peaked jockey cap made him look uncommonly like a crane.

'What does he want now?' thought Slimak. The horseman was evidently asking Slimakowa a question, for she got up and raised her head. Slimak noticed for the first time that she was in the habit of tucking up her skirts very high, showing her bare knees.

'What the deuce does he want?' he repeated, objecting to the short skirt.

The cavalier rode off the bridge with no little difficulty and reined up beside the woman. Slimak was now watching breathlessly.

Suddenly the young man stretched out his hand towards Slimakowa's neck, but she raised her stick so threateningly that the scared horse started away at a gallop, and the rider was left clinging to his neck.

'Jagna! what are you doing?' shouted Slimak; 'that 's the squire's brother-in-law, you fool!'

But the shout did not reach her, and the young man did not seem at all offended. He kissed his hand to Slimakowa and dug his heels into the horse, which threw up its head and started in the direction of the cottage at a sharp trot. But this time success did not attend the rider, his feet slipped out of the stirrups, and clutching his charger by the mane, he shouted: 'Stop, you devil!'

Jendrek heard the cry, clambered on to the gate, and seeing the strange performance, burst

out laughing. The rider's jockey cap fell off. 'Pick up the cap, my boy,' the horseman called out in passing.

'Pick it up yourself,' laughed Jendrek, clapping his hands to excite the horse still more.

The father listened to the boy's answer speechless with astonishment, but he soon recovered himself.

'Jendrek, you young dog, give the gentleman his cap when he tells you!' he cried.

Jendrek took the jockey cap between two fingers, holding it in front of him and offering it to the rider when he had succeeded in stopping his horse.

'Thank you, thank you very much,' he said, no less amused than Jendrek himself.

'Jendrek, take off your cap to the gentleman at once,' called Slimak.

'Why should I take off my cap to everybody?' asked the lad saucily.

'Excellent, that's right! . . .' The young man seemed pleased. 'Wait, you shall have twenty kopeks for that; a free citizen should never humble himself before anybody.'

Slimak, by no means sharing the gentleman's democratic theories, advanced towards Jendrek with his cap in one hand and the whip in the other.

'Citizen!' cried the cavalier, 'I beg you not to beat the boy . . . do not crush his independent soul . . . do not . . .' he would have liked to have continued, but the horse, getting bored, started off again in the direction of the bridge. When he saw Slimakowa coming towards the cottage, he took off his dusty cap and called out:

'Madam, do not let him beat the boy!'

Jendrek had disappeared.

Slimak stood rooted to the spot, pondering upon this queer fish, who first was impertinent to his wife, then called her 'Madam', and himself 'Citizen', and praised Jendrek for his cheek.

He returned angrily to his horses.

'Woa, lads! what's the world coming to? A peasant's son won't take off his cap to a gentleman, and the gentleman praises him for it! He is the squire's brother-in-law—all the same, he must be a little wrong in his head. Soon there will be no gentlemen left, and then the peasants will have to die. Maybe when Jendrek grows up he will look after himself; he won't be a peasant, that's clear. Woa, lads!'

He imagined Jendrek in button-boots and a jockey cap, and he spat.

'Bah! so long as I am about, you won't dress like that, young dog! All the same I shall have to warm his latter end for him, or else he won't take his cap off to the squire next, and then I can go begging. It's the wife's fault, she is always spoiling him. There's nothing for it, I must give him a hiding.'

Again dust was rising on the road, this time in the direction of the plain. Slimak saw two forms, one tall, the other oblong; the oblong was walking behind the tall one and nodding its head.

'Who's sending a cow to market?' he thought, '. . . well, the boy must be thrashed . . . if only I could have another cow and that bit of field.'

He drove the horses down the hill towards the Bialka, where he caught sight of Stasiek, but could see nothing more of his farm or of the road. He was beginning to feel very tired; his feet seemed a heavy weight, but the weight of uncertainty was

still greater, and he never got enough sleep. When his work was finished, he often had to drive off to the town.

'If I had another cow and that field,' he thought, 'I could sleep more.'

He had been meditating on this while harrowing over a fresh bit for half an hour, when he heard his wife calling from the hill:

'Josef, Josef!'

'What 's up?'

'Do you know what has happened?'

'How should I know?'

'Is it a new tax?' anxiously crossed his mind.

'Magda's uncle has come, you know, that Grochowski. . . .'

'If he wants to take the girl back—let him.'

'He has brought a cow and wants to sell her to Gryb for thirty-five paper roubles and a silver rouble for the halter. She is a lovely cow.'

'Let him sell her; what's that to do with me?'

'This much: that you are going to buy her,' said the woman firmly.

Slimak dropped his hand with the whip, bent his head forward, and looked at his wife. The proposal seemed monstrous.

'What 's wrong with you?' he asked.

'Wrong with me?' She raised her voice. 'Can't I afford the cow? Gryb has bought his wife a new cart, and you grudge me the beasts? There are two cows in the shed; do you ever trouble about them? You wouldn't have a shirt to your back if it weren't for them.'

'Good Lord,' groaned the man, who was getting muddled by his wife's eloquence, 'how am I to feed her? they won't sell me fodder from the manor.'

'Rent that field, and you will have fodder.'

'Fear God, Jagna! what are you saying? How am I to rent that field?'

'Go to the manor and ask the squire; say you will pay up the rent in a year's time.'

'As God lives, the woman is mad! our beasts pull a little from that field now for nothing; I should be worse off, because I should have to pay both for the cow and for the field. I won't go to the squire.'

His wife came close up to him and looked into his eyes. 'You won't go?'

'I won't go.'

'Very well, then I will take what fodder there is and your horses may go to the devil; but I won't let that cow go, *I* will buy her!'

'Then buy her.'

'Yes, I will buy her, but you have got to do the bargaining with Grochowski; I haven't the time, and I won't drink vodka with him.'

'Drink! bargain with him! you are mad about that cow!'

The quick-tempered woman shook her fist in his face.

'Josef, don't upset me when you yourself have nothing at all to propose. Listen! you are worrying every day that you haven't enough manure; you are always telling me that you want three beasts, and when the time comes, you won't buy them. The two cows you have cost you nothing and bring you in produce, the third would be clear gain. Listen . . . I tell you, listen! Finish your work, then come indoors and bargain for the cow; if not, I'll have nothing more to do with you.'

She turned her back and went off.

The man put his hands to his head.

'God bless me, what a woman!' he groaned, 'how can I, poor devil, rent that field? She persists in having the cow, and makes a fuss, and it doesn't matter what you say, you may as well talk to a wall. Why was I ever born? everything is against me. Woa, lads!'

He fancied that the earth and the wind were laughing at him again:

'You'll pay the thirty-five paper roubles and the silver rouble for the halter! Week after week, month after month you have been putting by your money, and to-day you'll spend it all as if you were cracking a nut. You will swell Grochowski's pockets and your own pouch will be empty. You will wait in fear and uncertainty at the manor and bow to the bailiff when it pleases him to give you the receipt for your rent! . . .

'Perhaps the squire won't even let me have the field.'

'Don't talk nonsense!' twittered the sparrows; 'you know quite well that he'll let you have it.'

'Oh yes, he'll let me have it,' he retorted hotly, 'for my good money. I would rather bear a severe pain than waste money on such a foolish thing.'

The sun was low by the time Slimak had finished his last bit of harrowing near the highroad. At the moment when he stopped he heard the new cow low. Her voice pleased him and softened his heart a little.

'Three cows is more than two,' he thought, 'people will respect me more. But the money . . . ah well, it 's all my own fault!'

He remembered how many times he had said that he must have another cow and that field, and

had boasted to his wife that people had encouraged him to carve his own farm implements, because he was so clever at it.

She had listened patiently for two or three years; now at last she took things into her own hands and told him to buy the cow and rent the field at once. Merciful Jesu! what a hard woman! What would she drive him to next? He would really have to put up sheds and make farm carts!

Intelligent and even ingenious as Slimak was, he never dared to do anything fresh unless driven to it. He understood his farm work thoroughly, he could even mend the thrashing-machine at the manor-house, and he kept everything in his head, beginning with the rotation of crops on his land. Yet his mind lacked that fine thread which joins the project to the accomplishment. Instead of this the sense of obedience was very strongly developed in him. The squire, the priest, the Wojt, his wife were all sent from God. He used to say:

'A peasant is in the world to carry out orders.'

The sun was sinking behind the hill crest when he drove his horses on to the highroad, and he was pondering on how he would begin his bargaining with Grochowski when he heard a guttural voice behind him, 'Heh! heh!'

Two men were standing on the highroad, one was grey-headed and clean-shaven, and wore a German peaked cap, the other young and tall, with a beard and a Polish cap. A two-horse vehicle was drawn up a little farther back.

'Is that your field?' the bearded man asked in an unpleasant voice.

'Stop, Fritz,' the elder interrupted him.

'What am I to stop for?' the other said angrily.

'Stop! Is this your land, gospodarz?' the grey-haired man asked very politely.

'Of course it 's mine, who else should it belong to?'

Stasiek came running up from the field at that moment and looked at the strangers with a mixture of distrust and admiration.

'And is that your field?' the bearded one repeated.

'Stop, Fritz! Is it your field, gospodarz?' the old man corrected him.

'It 's not mine; it belongs to the manor.'

'And whose is the hill with the pine?'

'Stop, Fritz . . .'

'Oh well, if you are going to interrupt all the time, father. . . .'

'Stop . . . is the hill yours, gospodarz?'

'It 's mine; no one else's.'

'There you are, Fritz,' the old man said in German; 'that 's the very place for Wilhelm's windmill.'

'The reason why Wilhelm has not yet put up a windmill is not that there are no hills, but that he is a lazy fellow.'

'Don't be disagreeable, Fritz! Then those fields beyond the highroad and the ravines are not yours, gospodarz?'

'How should they be, when they belong to the manor?'

'Oh yes,' the bearded one interrupted impatiently; 'everyone knows that he sits here in the manor-fields like a hole in a bridge. The devil take the whole business.'

'Wait, Fritz! Do the manor-fields surround you on all sides, gospodarz?'

'Of course.'

'Well, that will do,' said the younger man, drawing his father towards the carriage.

'God bless you, gospodarz,' said the elder, touching his cap.

'What a gossip you are, father! Wilhelm will never do anything; you may find him ever so many hills.'

'What do they want, daddy?' Stasiek asked suddenly.

'Ah, yes! true!'

Slimak was roused: 'Heh, sir!'

The older man looked round.

'What are you asking me all those questions for?'

'Because it pleases us to do so,' the younger man answered, pushing his father into the carriage.

'Farewell! we shall meet again!' cried the old man.

The carriage rolled away.

'What a crew they are on the highroad to-day, it 's like a fair!' said Slimak.

'But who are those people, daddy?'

'Those? They must be Germans from Wolka, twelve miles from here.'

'Why did they ask so many questions about your land?'

'They are not the only ones to do that, child. This country pleases people so much that they come over here from a long way off; they come as far as the pine hill and then they go away again. That is all I know about them.'

He turned the horses homeward and was already forgetting the Germans. The cow and the field were engaging all his thoughts. Supposing he bought her! he would be able to manure the

ground better, and he might even pay an old man to come to the cottage for the winter and teach his boys to read and write. What would the other peasants say to that? It would greatly improve his position; he would have a better place in church and at the inn, and with greater prosperity he would be able to take more rest.

Oh, for more rest! Slimak had never known hunger or cold, he had a good home and human affection, and he would have been quite happy if only his bones had not ached so much, and if he could have lain down or sat still to his heart's content.

CHAPTER III

Returning to the courtyard, Slimak let Maciek take the horses. He looked at the cow, which was tied to the fence. Despite the falling darkness he could see that she was a beautiful creature; she was white with black patches, had a small head, short horns and a large udder. He examined her and admitted that neither of his cows were as fine as this one.

He thought of leading her round the yard, but he suddenly felt as if he could not move another step, his arms seemed to be dropping from their joints and his legs were sinking. Until sunset a man can go on harrowing, but after sunset it is no good trying to do anything more. So he patted the cow instead of leading her about. She seemed to understand the situation, for she turned her head towards him and touched his hand with her wet mouth. Slimak was so overcome with emotion that he

very nearly kissed her, as if she were a human being.

'I must buy her,' he muttered, forgetting even his tiredness.

The gospodyni stood in the door with a pail of dishwater for the cattle.

'Maciek,' she called, 'when the cow has had a drink, lead her to the cowshed. The Soltys will stay the night; the cow can't be left out of doors.'

'Well, what next?' asked Slimak.

'What has to be, has to be,' she replied. 'He wants the thirty-five roubles and the silver rouble for the halter—but,' she continued after a pause, 'truth is truth, she is worth it. I milked her, and though she had been on the road, she gave more milk than Lysa.'

'Have you asked him whether he won't come down a bit?'

The peasant again felt the weariness in all his limbs. Good God! how many hours of sleep would have to be sacrificed, before he could make another thirty-five roubles!

'Not likely! It's something that he will sell her to us at all; he keeps on saying he promised her to Gryb.'

Slimak scratched his head.

'Come, Josef, be friendly and drink vodka with him, then perhaps the Lord Jesus will give him reflection. But keep looking at me, and don't talk too much; you will see, it will turn out all right.'

Maciek led the cow to the shed; she looked about and whisked her tail so heartily that Slimak could not take his eyes off her.

'It's God's will,' he murmured. 'I'll bargain for her.'

He crossed himself at the door, but his heart was trembling in anticipation of all the difficulties.

His guest was sitting by the fire and admonishing Magda in fatherly fashion to be faithful and obedient to her master and mistress.

'If they order you into the water—jump into the water; if they order you into the fire—go into the fire; and if the mistress gives you a good hiding, kiss her hand and thank her, for I tell you: sacred is the hand that strikes. . . .'

As he said this the red light of the fire fell upon him; he had raised his hand and looked like a preacher.

Magda fancied that the trembling shadow on the wall was repeating: 'Sacred is the hand that strikes!'

She wept copiously; she felt she was listening to a beautiful sermon, but at the same time blue stripes seemed to be swelling on her back at his words. Yet she listened without fear or regret, only with dim gratitude, mingled with recollections of her childhood.

The door opened and Slimak said:

'The Lord be praised.'

'In all eternity,' answered Grochowski. When he stood up, his head nearly touched the ceiling.

'May God repay you, Soltys, for coming to us,' said Slimak, shaking his hand.

'May God repay you for your kindness in receiving me.'

'And say at once, should you be uncomfortable.'

'Eh! I'm not half so comfortable at home, and it 's not only to me but also to the cow that you are giving hospitality.'

'Praise God that you are satisfied.'

'I am doubly satisfied, because I see how well you are treating Magda. Magda! fall at your master's feet at once, for your father could not treat you better. And you, neighbour, don't spare the strap.'

'She's not a bad girl,' said Slimak.

Sobbing heartily the girl fell first at her uncle's feet, then at the gospodarz's, and then escaped into the passage. She hugged herself and still emitted great sobs; but her eyes were dry. She began calling softly in a mournful voice: 'Pig! pig! pig!' But the pigs had turned in for the night. Instead Jendrek and Stasiek with the dog Burek emerged from the twilight. Jendrek wanted to push her over, but she gave him a punch in the eye. The boys seized her by the arms, Burek followed, and shrieking and barking and inextricably entwined so that one could not tell which was child and which was dog, all four melted into the mists that were hanging over the meadows.

Sitting by the stove, the two gospodarze were talking.

'How is it you are getting rid of the cow?'

'You see, it 's like this. That cow is not mine, it belongs to Magda, but my wife says she doesn't care about looking after somebody else's cow, and the shed is too small for ours as it is. I don't pay much attention to her usually, but it happens that there is a bit of land to be sold adjoining Magda's. Komara, to whom it belonged, has drunk himself to death. So I am thinking: I will sell the cow and buy the girl another acre—land is land.'

'That 's true!' sighed Slimak.

'And as there will be new servituty, the girl will get even more.'

'How is that?' Slimak became interested.

'They will give you twice as much as you possess; I possess twenty-five acres, so I shall have fifty. How many have you got?'

'Ten.'

'Then you will have twenty, and Magda will get another two and a half with her own.'

'Is it certain about the servituty?'

'Who can tell? some say it is, others laugh about it. But I am thinking I will buy this land while there is the chance, especially as my wife does not wish it.'

'Then what is the good of buying the land if you will shortly get it for nothing?'

'The truth is, as it's not my money I don't care how I spend it. If I were you I shouldn't be in a hurry to rent from the manor either; there is no harm in waiting. The wise man is never in a hurry.'

'No, the wise man goes slowly,' Slimak deliberated.

The gospodyni appeared at that moment with Maciek. They went into the alcove, drew two chairs and the cherrywood table into the middle of it, covered it with a cloth and placed a petroleum lamp without a chimney on it.

'Come, Soltys,' called the gospodyni, 'you will have supper more comfortably in here.'

Maciek, with a broad smile, retired awkwardly behind the stove as the two gospodarze went into the alcove.

'What a beautiful room,' said Grochowski, looking round, 'plenty of holy pictures on the walls, a painted bed, a wooden floor and flowers in the windows. That must be your doing, gospodyni?'

'Why, yes,' said the woman, pleased, 'he is

always at the manor or in the town and doesn't care about his home; it was all I could do to make him lay the floor. Be so kind as to sit near the stove, neighbour, I'll get supper.'

She poured out a large bowl of peeled barley soup and put it on the table, and a small one for Maciek.

'Eat in God's name, and if you want anything, say so.'

'But are not you going to sit down?'

'I always eat last with the children. Maciek, you may take your bowl.'

Maciek, grinning, took his portion and sat down on a bench opposite the alcove, so that he could see the Soltys and listen to human intercourse, for which he was longing. He looked contentedly from behind his steaming bowl at the table; the smoking lamp seemed to him the most brilliant illumination, and the wooden chairs the height of comfort. The sight of the Soltys, who was lolling back, filled him with reverence. Was it not he who had driven him to the recruiting-office when it was the time for the drawing of lots? who had ordered him to be taken to the hospital and told him he would come out completely cured? who collected the taxes and carried the largest banner at the processions and intoned 'Let us praise the Holy Virgin'? And now he, Maciek Owczarz, was sitting under one roof with this same Grochowski.

How comfortable he made himself! Maciek tried to lean back in the same fashion, but the scandalized wall pushed him forward, reminding him that he was not the Soltys. So although his back ached, he bent still lower and hid his feet in their torn boots under the bench. Why should

he be comfortable ? It was enough if the master and the Soltys were. He ate his soup and listened with both ears.

'What makes you take the cow to Gryb ?' asked the gospodyni.

'Because he wants to buy her.'

'We might buy her ourselves.'

'Yes, that might be so,' put in Slimak; 'the girl is here, the cow should be here too.'

'That's right, isn't it, Maciek ?' asked the woman.

'Oho, ho !' laughed Maciek, till the soup ran out of his spoon.

'What 's true is true,' said Grochowski; 'even Gryb ought to understand that the cow ought to be where the girl is.'

'Then sell her to us,' Slimak said quickly.

Grochowski dropped his spoon on the table and his head on his chest. He reflected for a while, then he said in a tone of resignation :

'There 's no help for it; as you are quite decided I must sell you the cow.'

'But you'll take off something for us, won't you ?' hastily added the woman in an ingratiating tone.

The Soltys reflected once more.

'You see, it 's like this ; if it were my cow I would come down. But she belongs to a poor orphan. How could I harm her ? Give me thirty-five paper roubles and a silver rouble and the cow will be yours.'

'That 's too much,' sighed Slimak.

'But she is worth it !' said the Soltys.

'Still, money sits in the chest and doesn't eat.'

'Neither will it give milk.'

'I should have to rent the field.'

'That will be cheaper than buying fodder.'

A long silence ensued, then Slimak said:

'Well, neighbour, say your last word.'

'I tell you, thirty-five paper roubles and a silver rouble. Gryb will be angry, but I'll do this for you.'

The gospodyni now cleared the bowl off the table and returned with a bottle of vodka, two glasses, and a smoked sausage on a plate.

'To your health, neighbour,' said Slimak, pouring out the vodka.

'Drink in God's name!'

They emptied the glasses and began to chew the dry sausage in silence. Maciek was so affected by the sight of the vodka that he folded his hands on his stomach. It struck him that those two must be feeling very happy, so he felt happy too.

'I really don't know whether to buy the cow or not,' said Slimak; 'your price has taken the wish from me.'

Grochowski moved uneasily on his chair.

'My dear friend,' he said, 'what am I to do? this is the orphan's affair. I have got to buy her land, if for no other reason but because it annoys my wife.'

'You won't give thirty-five roubles for an acre.'

'Land is getting dearer, because the Germans want to buy it.'

'The Germans?'

'Those who bought Wolka. They want other Germans to settle near here.'

'There were two Germans near my field asking me a lot of questions. I didn't know what they wanted.'

'There you are! they creep in. Directly one

has settled, others come like ants after honey, and then the land gets dearer.'

'Do they know anything about peasants' work?'

'Rather! They make more profits than we who are born here. The Germans are clever; they have a lot of cattle, sow clover and carry on a trade in the winter. We can't compete with them.'

'I wonder what their religion is like? They talk to each other like Jews.'

'Their religion is better than the Jews',' the Soltys said, after reflecting; 'but what is not Catholic is nothing. They have churches with benches and an organ; but their priests are married and go about in overcoats, and where the blessed Host ought to be on the altar they have a crucifix, like ours in the porch.'

'That 's not as good as our religion.'

'Why!' said Grochowski, 'they don't even pray to the Blessed Mother.'

The gospodyni crossed herself.

'It 's odd that the Merciful God should bless such people with prosperity. Drink, neighbour!'

'To your health! Why should God not bless them, when they have a lot of cattle? That 's at the bottom of all prosperity.'

Slimak became pensive and suddenly struck his fist on the table.

'Neighbour,' he cried, raising his voice, 'sell me the cow!'

'I will sell her to you,' cried Grochowski, also striking the table.

'I'll give you . . . thirty-one roubles . . . as I love you.' Grochowski embraced him.

'Brother . . . give me . . . thirty . . . and four paper roubles and a silver rouble for the halter.'

The tired children cautiously stole into the room ; the gospodyni poured out some soup for them and told them to sit in the corner and be quiet. And quiet they were, except at one moment when Stasiek fell off the bench and his mother slapped Jendrek for it. Maciek dozed, dreaming that he was drinking vodka. He felt the liquor going to his head and fancied himself sitting by the Soltys and embracing him. The fumes of the vodka and the lamp were filling the room. Slimak and Grochowski moved closer together.

'Neighbour . . . Soltys,' said Slimak, striking the table again, 'I'll give you whatever you wish, your word is worth more than money to me, for you are the cleverest man in the parish. The Wojt is a pig . . . you are more to me than the Wojt or even the Government Inspector, for you are cleverer than they are . . . devil take me!'

They fell on each other's shoulders and Grochowski wept.

'Josef, brother, . . . don't call me Soltys but brother . . . for we are brothers!'

'Wojciek . . . Soltys . . . say how much you want for the cow. I'll give it you, I'll rip myself open to give it you . . . thirty-five paper roubles and a silver rouble.'

'Oh dear, oh dear!' wailed the gospodyni. 'Weren't you letting the cow go for thirty-three roubles just now, Soltys?'

Grochowski raised his tearful eyes first to her, then to Slimak.

'Was I? . . . Josef . . . brother . . . I'll give you the cow for thirty-three roubles. Take her! let the orphan starve, so long as you, my brother, get a prime cow.'

Slimak beat a tattoo on the table.

'Am I to cheat the orphan? I won't; I'll give you thirty-five . . .'

'What are you doing, you fool?' his wife interrupted him.

'Yes, don't be foolish,' Grochowski supported her. 'You have entertained me so finely that I'll give you the cow for thirty-three roubles. Amen! that 's my last word.'

'I won't!' shouted Slimak. 'Am I a Jew that I should be paid for hospitality?'

'Josef!' his wife said warningly.

'Go away, woman!' he cried, getting up with difficulty; 'I'll teach you to mix yourself up in my affairs.'

He suddenly fell into the embrace of the weeping Grochowski.

'Thirty-five . . .'

'Thirty-three . . .' sobbed the Soltys; 'may I not burn in hell!'

'Josef,' his wife said, 'you must respect your guest; he is older than you, and he is Soltys. Maciek, help me to get them into the barn.'

'I'll go by myself,' roared Slimak.

'Thirty-three roubles . . .' groaned Grochowski, 'chop me to bits, but I won't take a grosz more . . . I am a Judas . . . I wanted to cheat you. I said I was taking the cow to Gryb . . . but I was bringing her to you . . . for you are my brother . . .'

They linked arms and made for the window. Maciek opened the door into the passage, and after several false starts they reached the courtyard. The gospodyni took a lantern, rug and pillow, and followed them. When she reached the yard she saw Grochowski kneeling and rubbing his eyes with

his sukmana and Slimak lying on the manure heap. Maciek was standing over them.

'We must do something with them,' he said to the gospodyni; 'they 've drunk a whole bottle of vodka.'

'Get up, you drunkard,' she cried, 'or I'll pour water over your head.'

'I'll pour it over you, I'll give you a whipping presently!' her husband shouted back at her.

Grochowski fell on his neck.

'Don't make a hell of your house, brother, or grief will come to us both.'

Maciek could not wonder enough at the changes wrought in men by vodka. Here was the Soltys, known in the whole parish as a hard man, crying like a child, and Slimak shouting like the bailiff and disobeying his wife.

'Come to the barn, Soltys,' said Slimakowa, taking him by one arm while Maciek took the other. He followed like a lamb, but while she was preparing his bed on the straw, he fell upon the threshing-floor and could not be moved by any manner of means.

'Go to bed, Maciek,' said the gospodyni; 'let that drunkard lie on the manure-heap, because he has been so disagreeable.'

Maciek obeyed and went to the stable. When all was quiet, he began for his amusement to pretend that he was drunk, and acted the part of Slimak or the Soltys in turns. He talked in a tearful voice like Grochowski: 'Don't make a hell of your house, brother . . .' and in order to make it more real he tried to make himself cry. At first he did not succeed, but when he remembered his foot, and that he was the most miserable creature, and

the gospodyni hadn't even given him a glass of vodka, the tears ran freely from his eyes, until he too went to sleep.

About midnight Slimak awoke, cold and wet, for it had begun to rain. Gradually his aching head remembered the Soltys, the cow, the barley soup and the large bottle of vodka. What had become of the vodka? He was not quite certain on this point, but he was quite sure that the soup had disagreed with him.

'I always say you should not eat hot barley soup at night,' he groaned.

He was no longer in doubt whether or no he was lying on the manure-heap. Slowly he walked up to the cottage and hesitated on the doorstep; but the rain began to fall more heavily. He stood still in the passage and listened to Magda's snoring; then he cautiously opened the door of the room.

Stasiek lay on the bench under the window, breathing deeply. There was no sound from the alcove, and he realized that his wife was not asleep.

'Jagna, make room . . .' he tried to steady his voice, but he was seized with fear.

There was no answer.

'Come . . . move up . . .'

'Be off with you, you tippler, and don't come near me.'

'Where am I to go?'

'To the manure-heap or the pigsty, that's your proper place. You threatened me with the whip! I'll take it out of you!'

'What's the use of talking like that, when nothing is wrong?' said Slimak, holding his aching head.

'Nothing wrong? You insisted on paying

thirty-five paper roubles and a silver rouble when Grochowski was letting the cow go for thirty-three roubles. Nothing wrong, indeed! do three roubles mean nothing to you?'

Slimak crept to the bench where Stasiek lay and touched his feet.

'Is that you, daddy?' the boy asked, waking up.

'Yes, it 's I.'

'What are you doing here?'

'I'm just sitting down; something is worrying me inside.'

The boy put his arms round his neck.

'I'm so glad you have come,' he said; 'those two Germans keep coming after me.'

'What Germans?'

'Those two by our field, the old one and the man with the beard. They don't say what they want, but they are walking on me.'

'Go to sleep, child; there are no Germans here.'

Stasiek pressed closer to him and began to chatter again:

'Isn't it true, daddy, that the water can see?'

'What should it see?'

'Everything—everything—the sky, the hills; it sees us when we follow the harrows.'

'Go to sleep. Don't talk nonsense.'

'It does, it does, daddy, I've watched it myself,' he whispered, going to sleep.

The room was too hot for Slimak; he dragged himself up and staggered to the barn, where he fell into a bundle of straw.

'But what I gave for the cow I gave for her,' he muttered in the direction of the sleeping Grochowski.

CHAPTER IV

Slimakowa came to the barn early the next morning and called her husband. 'Are you going to be long idling there?'

'What 's the matter?'

'It 's time to go to the manor-house.'

'Have they sent for me?'

'Why should they send for you? You have got to go to them and see about the field.'

Slimak groaned, but came out on to the threshing-floor. His face was bloated, he looked ashamed of himself, and his hair was full of straw.

'Just look at him,' jeered his wife: 'his sukmana is dirty and wet, he hasn't taken off his boots all night, and he scowls like a brigand. You are more fit for a scarecrow in a flaxfield than for talking to the squire. Change your clothes and go.'

She returned to the cowshed, and a weight fell off Slimak's mind that the matter had ended there. He had expected to be jeered at till the afternoon. He came out into the yard and looked round. The sun was high, the ground had dried after the rain; the wind from the ravines brought the song of birds and a damp, cheerful smell; the fields had become green during the night. The sky looked as if it had been freshened up, and the cottage seemed whiter.

'A nice day,' he murmured, gaining courage, and went indoors to dress. He pulled the straw out of his hair and put on a clean shirt and new boots. He thought they did not look polished enough, so he took a piece of tallow and rubbed it well first over his hair, then over his boots. Then he stood

in front of the glass and smiled contentedly at the brilliance he reflected from head to foot.

His wife came in at that moment and looked disdainfully at him.

'What have you been doing to your head? You stink of tallow miles off. You'd better comb your hair.'

Slimak, silently acknowledging the justice of the remark, took a thick comb from behind the looking-glass and smoothed his hair till it looked like polished glass, then he applied the soap to his neck so energetically that his fingers left large, dark streaks.

'Where is Grochowski?' he asked in a more cheerful voice, for the cold water had added to his good temper.

'He has gone.'

'What about the money?'

'I paid him, but he wouldn't take the thirty-three roubles; he said that Jesus Christ had lived in this world for thirty-three years, so it would not be right for him to take as much as that for the cow.'

'Very proper,' Slimak agreed, wishing to impress her with his theological knowledge, but she turned to the stove and took off a pot of hot barley soup. Offering it to him with an air of indifference: 'Don't talk so much,' she said. 'Put something hot inside you and go to the manor-house. But just try and bargain as you did with the Soltys and I shall have something to say to you.'

He sat humbly, eating his soup, and his wife took some money from the chest. 'Take these ten roubles,' she said, 'give them to the squire himself and promise to bring the rest to-morrow.

But mind what he asks for the field, and kiss his hands, and embrace his and the lady's feet, so that he may let you off at least three roubles. Will you remember ? '

' Why shouldn't I remember ? '

He was obviously repeating his wife's admonitions, for he suddenly stopped eating and tapped the table rhythmically with the spoon.

' Well, then, don't sit there and think, but put on your sukmana and go. And take the boys with you.'

' What for ? '

' What for ? They are to support you when you ask the squire, and Jendrek will tell me how you have bargained. Now do you know what for ? '

' Women are a pest ! ' growled Slimak, when she had unfolded her carefully laid plans. ' Curse her, how she lords it over me ! You can see that her father was a bailiff.'

He struggled into his sukmana, which was brand new and beautifully embroidered at the collar and pockets with coloured thread ; put on a broad leather belt, tied the ten roubles up in a rag and slipped them into his sukmana. The children had long been ready, and at last they started.

They had no sooner gone than loneliness began to fill Slimakowa's heart. She went outside the gate and watched them ; her husband, with his hands in his pockets, was strolling along the road, Jendrek on his right and Stasiek on his left. Presently Jendrek boxed Stasiek's ears and as a result he was walking on the left and Stasiek on the right. Then Slimak boxed both their ears, after which they were both walking on the left, Jendrek

in the ditch, so that he could threaten his brother with his fist.

'Bless them, they always find some nice amusement for themselves,' she whispered, smiling, and went back to put on the dinner.

Having settled the misunderstanding between his sons, Slimak sang softly to himself:

'Your love is no courtier, my own heart's desire,
He 's riding a pony on his way to the squire.'

Then in a more melancholy strain:

'Oh dearie, dearie me
This is great misery,
What shall I do ? . . .'

He sighed, and felt that no song could adequately express his anxiety. Would the squire let him have the field ? They were just passing it; he was almost afraid to look at it, so beautiful and unattainable did it seem. All the fines he had had to pay for his cattle, all the squire's threats and admonitions came into his mind. It struck him that if the field lay farther off and produced sand instead of good grass, he would have a better chance.

'Eh, I don't care!' he cried, throwing up his head with an air of indifference; 'they've often asked me to take it.'

That was so, but it had been at times when he had not wanted it; now that he did, they would bargain hard, or not let him have it at all. Who could tell why that should be so ? It was a law of nature that landlords and peasants were always at cross purposes.

He remembered how often he had charged too much for work done, or how often the gospodarze had refused to come to terms with the squire about

rights of grazing or wood-gathering in the forests, and he felt contrite. Good Lord! how beautifully the squire had spoken to them: 'Let us help each other and live peaceably like good neighbours.'

And they had answered: 'What 's the good of being neighbours? A nobleman is a nobleman and a peasant is a peasant. We should prefer peasants for neighbours and you would prefer noblemen.' Then the squire had cited: 'Remember, the runaway goat came back to the cart and said, "Put me in." But I shall say you nay.' And Gryb, in the name of them all, had answered: 'The goat will come, your honour, when you throw your forests open.'

The squire had said nothing, but his trembling moustaches had warned them that he would not forget that answer.

'I always told Gryb not to talk with a long tongue,' Slimak sighed. 'Now it is I who will have to suffer for his impudence.'

A new idea came into his head. Why should he not pay for the field in work instead of cash? The squire might accept it, for he wasn't half a bad gentleman. It was true, the other gospodarze looked down upon him, because he was the only one who hired himself out for work; but whatever happened, the squire would always be the squire, and they the gospodarze. He hummed again, but under his breath, so that the boys should not hear him:

> 'The cuckoo cuckooed in the forest,
> Say the neighbours, I am the dullest.'

Suddenly he turned upon Stasiek, and wanted to know why he was dragging along as if he were being taken to jail, and didn't talk.

'I . . . I am wondering why we are going to the manor ?'

'Don't you want to go ?'

'No; I am afraid.'

'What is there to be afraid of ?' snapped Slimak, but he himself was shivering.

'You see, my boy,' he continued, more kindly, 'we have bought the new cow from the Soltys and we shall want more hay, so I am going to ask the squire to let me rent the field.'

'I see. . . . But, daddy, I am always wondering what the grass thinks when the cows chew it up.'

'What should it think ? It doesn't think at all.'

'But, daddy, why shouldn't it think ? When people are standing round the church in a crowd, they look like grass from a distance, all red and yellow, like flowers in a field. If some horrible cow came and lapped them up with her tongue, wouldn't they be able to think ?'

'People would scream, but the grass says nothing.'

'It does say something ! A dry stick cracks when you tread on it, and a fresh branch cries and clings to the tree when you tear it off, and the grass squeaks and holds on with its feet, . . . and . . .'

'Oh ! you are always saying queer things,' interrupted his father; 'and you, Jendrek, are you glad that we are going to the manor-house ?'

'Is it I who is going or you ?' said Jendrek, shrugging his shoulders. 'I shouldn't go.'

'Well, what would you do ?'

'I should take the hay and stack it in the yard ; then let them come !'

'You would dare to cut the squire's hay ?'

'How is it his? Has he sown the grass? or is the field near his house?'

'Don't you see, silly, that the meadow is his just as well as his other fields?'

'They are his, so long as no one takes them. Our land and our house were his once, now they are yours. Why should he be better off than we are? He does nothing, yet he has enough land for a hundred peasants.'

'He has it because he has it, because he is a gentleman.'

'Pooh! If you wore a coat, and your trousers outside your boots, you would be a gentleman; but for all that you wouldn't have the land.'

'You are stupid,' said Slimak, getting angry.

'I know I am stupid, that is because I can't read or write, but Jasiek Gryb can, and therefore he is clever, and he says there must be equality, and there will be when the peasants have taken the land from the nobility.'

'Jasiek had better leave off taking money from his father's chest before he disposes of other people's property! He might give mine to Maciek and take the squire's for himself, but he would never give his own away. Let it be as God has ordered.'

'Did God give the land to the squire?'

'God has ordered that there should not be equality in the world. A pine is tall, a hazel is low, the grass is still lower. Look at sensible dogs. When a pail of dish-water is brought out to them, the strongest drinks first, and the others stand by and lick their lips, although they know that he will take the best part; then they all take their turn. If they start quarrelling, they upset the pail and the strong get the better of the weak.

If people were to say to each other: Disgorge what you have swallowed, the strong would drive off the weak and leave them to starve.'

'But if God has given the land to the squire, how can they begin to distribute it to the people now?'

'They distribute it so that every one should get what is right for him, not that he should take what he likes.'

His son's amazing views added a new worry to Slimak's mind.

'The rascal! listening to people of that sort! he'll never make a peasant; it's a mercy he hasn't stolen yet.'

They were nearing the drive to the manor-house, and Slimak was walking more and more slowly; Stasiek looked more and more frightened, Jendrek alone kept his saucy air.

Through the dark branches of old lime-trees the roof and chimneys of the manor became visible. Suddenly two shots rang out.

'They are shooting!' cried Jendrek excitedly, and ran forward. Stasiek caught hold of his father's pocket. Slimak called Jendrek, who returned sulkily. They were now on the terrace, where the manor-fields stretched on either side. Lower down lay the village, still lower the field by the river, in front of them was the manor, with the outbuildings, enclosed by a railing.

'There! that 's the manor-house,' said Slimak to Stasiek. 'Isn't it beautiful?'

'Which one is it?'

'Why! the one with pillars in front.'

Another shot rang out, and they saw a man in fanciful sportsman's dress.

'The horseman of yesterday,' cried Jendrek.

'Ah, that freak!' said Slimak, scrutinizing him with his head on one side; 'he'll bring me bad luck about the field.'

'He has a splendid gun,' cried Jendrek; 'but what is he shooting? There's nothing but sparrows here.'

'Perhaps he is shooting at us?' suggested Stasiek timidly.

'Why should he be shooting at us?' his father reassured him; 'shooting at people isn't allowed. It's true there is no knowing what a lunatic might do.'

The sportsman approached, loading his gun; the tattered remains of some sparrows hung from his bag.

'The Lord be praised,' said Slimak, taking off his cap.

'How do you do, citizen?' replied the sportsman, touching his jockey cap.

'What a lovely gun!' sighed Jendrek.

'Do you like it? Eh, wasn't it you who picked up my cap the other day? I am in your debt; here you are.' He handed Jendrek a twenty-kopek piece. 'Is that your father? Citizen, if you want to be friends with me, do not bow so low, and cover your head. It is time that these survivals of servitude should be forgotten; they can only do us both harm. Cover yourself, I beg you.'

Slimak tried to do as he was told, but his hand refused obedience.

'I feel awkward, sir, standing before you with my cap on,' he said.

'Oh, hang hereditary social differences!' exclaimed the young man, snatching the cap from Slimak's hands and putting it on his head.

'Hang it all!' thought the peasant, unable to follow the democrat's intentions.

'What are you going to the manor for?' asked the latter. 'Have you come on business with my brother-in-law?'

'We want to beg a favour of the squire'—Slimak refrained with difficulty from bowing again—'that he should let us rent the field close to my property.'

'What for?'

'We've bought a new cow.'

'How much cattle have you?'

'The Lord Jesus possesses five tails in my gospodarstwo, two horses and three cows, not counting the pigs.'

'And have you much land?'

'I wish to God I had, but I have only ten acres, and those are growing more sterile every year.'

'That 's because you don't understand agriculture. Ten acres is a large property; in other countries several families live comfortably on that; here it is not enough for one. But what can you expect if you sow nothing but rye?'

'What else should I sow, sir? Wheat doesn't do very well.'

'Vegetables, my friend, that does the trick! The market gardeners near Warsaw pay thirty or forty roubles an acre rent and do excellently well.'

Slimak hung his head. He was much perturbed, for he had arrived at the conclusion that the squire would not let him have the field, because he had so much land already, or that he would ask him thirty or forty roubles' rent. What other object could the young gentleman possibly have for saying such strange things?

They were approaching the entrance to the garden.

'I see my sister is in the garden; my brother-in-law is sure to be about too. I will go and tell him of your business.'

Slimak bowed low, but inwardly he thought: 'May the pestilence take him! He is impertinent to my wife, stirs up the boy, and puts my cap on my head; but he wants to squeeze money out of me, all the same. I knew he would bring me bad luck.'

Sounds of an American organ which the squire was playing came from the house.

'Daddy, daddy, they are playing!' cried Stasiek in great excitement; he was flushed, and trembled with emotion, even Jendrek was affected. Slimak took off his cap and said a prayer for deliverance from the evil spell of the young gentleman.

When the organ stopped, they watched this same young gentleman talking to his sister in the garden.

'Look at the lady, dad,' said Jendrek; 'she is just like a horsefly, yellow with black spots, and thin in the waist and fat at the end.'

The democrat was putting Slimak's case before his sister, and complained of the signs of servility with which he met at every turn. He said they spoilt his temper.

'But what can I do?' said the lady.

'Go up to them and give them courage.'

'I like that!' she said. 'I arranged a treat for our farm-labourers' children to encourage them, and next day they plundered my peach trees. Go to them? I've done that too. I once went into a cottage where a child was ill, and my clothes

smelt so strongly that I had to give them to my maid. No, thank you!'

'All the same, I beg you to do something for these people.'

Their conversation had been in French while they were approaching the railings.

'Oh, it 's Slimak.' The lady raised her glasses. 'Well, my good man, my brother wants me to do something for you. Have you got a daughter?'

'I haven't, my lady,' said Slimak, kissing the hem of her dress.

'That 's a pity, I might have taught her to do beadwork. Perhaps I could teach the boys to read?'

'They are wanted at home, my lady; the elder one is useful already, and the younger one looks after the pigs in the fields.'

'Do something for them yourself,' she said to her brother in French.

'What are they plotting against me?' thought Slimak.

The squire now came out and joined the group. Slimak began bowing again, Stasiek's eyes filled with tears, even Jendrek lost his self-assurance. The conversation reverted into French, and the democrat warmly supported Slimak's cause.

'All right, I'll let him have the field,' said the squire; 'then there will be an end to the trespassing; besides, he is the most honest man in the village.'

When Slimak's suspense had become so acute that he had thoughts of returning home without having settled the business, the squire said:

'So you want me to let you have the field by the river?'

'If you will be so kind, sir.'

'And if you will kindly take off three roubles,'

Jendrek added quickly. Slimak's blood ran cold; the squire exchanged glances with his wife.

'What does that mean?' he asked. 'From what am I to take off three roubles?'

Involuntarily Slimak's hand reached for his belt, but he recollected himself; he made up his mind in despair to tell the truth.

'If you please, sir, don't take any notice of that puppy; my wife has been at me for not bargaining well, and she told me to get you to take three roubles off the rent, and now this young scoundrel puts me to shame.'

'Mother told me to look after you.'

Slimak became absolutely tongue-tied, and the party on the other side of the railing were convulsed with laughter.

'Look,' said the squire in French, 'that is the peasant all over. He won't allow you to speak a word to his wife, but he can't do anything without her, and doesn't understand any business whatsoever without her explanations.'

'Lovely!' laughed his wife, 'now, if you did as I tell you, we should have left this dull place long ago and gone to Warsaw.'

'Don't make the peasant out to be an idiot,' remonstrated his brother-in-law.

'No need for me to do that; he *is* an idiot. Our peasants are all muscle and stomach; they leave reason and energy to their wives. Slimak is one of the most intelligent, yet I will bet you anything that I can immediately give you a proof of his being a donkey. Josef,' he said, turning to Slimak, 'your wife told you to drive a good bargain?'

'Certainly, sir, what is true is true.'

'Do you know what Lukasiak pays me yearly?'

'They say ten roubles.'

'Then you ought to pay twenty roubles for the two acres.'

'If you will be lenient, sir,' began Slimak.

'. . . and let me off three roubles,' completed the squire. Slimak looked confused.

'Very good, I will let you off three roubles; you shall pay me seventeen roubles yearly. Are you satisfied?'

Slimak bowed to the ground and thought: 'What is he up to? He is not bargaining!'

'Now, Slimak,' continued the squire, 'I will make you another proposal. Do you know what Gryb paid me for the two acres he bought?'

'Seventy roubles.'

'Just so, and he paid for the surveyor and the lawyer. I will sell you those two acres for sixty roubles and let you off all expenses, so you would gain a clear twenty roubles against Gryb's bargain. But I make one condition, you must decide at once and without consulting your wife; to-morrow my conditions wouldn't be the same.'

Slimak's eyes blazed; he fancied he saw quite clearly now that there was a conspiracy against him.

'That 's not a handsome thing to offer, sir,' he said, with a forced smile; 'you yourself consult with the lady and the young gentleman.'

'There you are! Isn't he a finished idiot?'

His brother-in-law tapped Slimak on the shoulder. 'Agree to it, my friend; you'll have the best of the bargain. Of course he agrees,' he said, turning to the squire.

'Well, Josef, will you buy it? Do you agree to my conditions?'

'I'm not such a fool,' thought Slimak, and aloud: 'It wouldn't be fair to buy it without my wife.'

'Very well, I'll let it to you. Give me your earnest-money and come for the receipt to-morrow. There you have the peasant, my democrat!'

Slimak paid the ten roubles and glared at the retreating party.

'Ah! you'd like to cheat a peasant, but he has got too much sense! It 's true, then, what Grochowski said about the land-distribution. Sixty roubles for a field worth seventy, indeed!'

All the same he could not quite get rid of the thought that it might have been a straightforward offer. He felt hot all over and wanted to shout or run after the squire. At that moment the young man hastily turned back.

'Buy that field,' he said, quite out of breath; 'my brother-in-law would still consent if you asked him.'

In an instant Slimak's distrust returned.

'No, sir; it wouldn't be fair.'

'Cattle!' murmured the democrat, and turned his back. The bargain had disappeared.

'Let's go home, boys,' and under his breath: 'Damn the aristocracy!' When they were nearing their home, the boys ran on ahead, for they were hungry.

'What is this Jendrek tells me? They wanted to sell you the land for sixty roubles?'

'That is so,' he replied, rather frightened; 'they are afraid of the new land-distributions. They are clever too! They knew all about my business beforehand, and the squire had set his brother-in-law on to me.'

'What! that fellow who spoke to me by the river?'

'That same fool. He gave Jendrek twenty kopeks and put my cap on my head, and he told me ten acres was a fortune.'

'A fortune? His brother-in-law has a thousand and says he hasn't enough! You did quite right not to buy the field; there is something shady about that business.'

But his wife's satisfaction did not completely reassure Slimak; he was wretchedly in doubt. His dinner gave him no pleasure, and he strolled about the house without knowing what to do. When his irritation had reached its climax, a happy thought struck him.

'Come here, Jendrek,' he said, unbuckling his belt.

'Oh, daddy, don't,' wailed the boy, although he had been prepared for the last two hours.

'You won't escape it this time; lie down on the bench. You've been laughing at the young gentleman and even making fun of the squire.'

Stasiek, in tears, embraced his father's knees, Magda ran out of the room, Jendrek howled.

'I tell you, lie down! I'll teach you to run about with that scoundrel of a Jasiek!'

At that moment Slimakowa tapped at the window. 'Josef, come quick, something has happened to the new cow, she 's staggering.'

Slimak let go of Jendrek and ran to the cowshed. The three cows were standing quietly chewing the cud.

'It has passed off,' said the woman; 'but I tell you a minute ago she was staggering worse than you did yesterday.'

He examined the cow carefully, but could find nothing wrong with her.

Jendrek had meanwhile slipped away, his father's temper had cooled, and the matter ended as usual on these occasions.

CHAPTER V

It was the height of summer. The squire and his wife had gone away, and the villagers had forgotten all about them. New wool had begun to grow on the shorn sheep.

The sun was so hot that the clouds fled from the sky into the woods, and the ground protected itself with what it could find; with dust on the highroads, grass in the meadows, and heavy crops in the fields.

But human beings had to toil their hardest at this time. At the manor they were cutting clover and hoeing turnips; in the cottages the women were piling up the potatoes, while the old women were gathering mallows for cooling drinks and lime-blossoms against the ague. The priest spent all his days tracking and taking swarms of bees; Josel, the innkeeper, was making vinegar. The woods resounded with the voices of children picking berries.

The corn was getting ripe, and Slimak began to cut the rye the day after the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary. He was in a hurry to get the work done in two or three days, lest the corn should drop out in the great heat, and also because he wanted to help with the harvesting at the manor.

Usually he, Maciek, and Jendrek worked together, alternately cutting and binding the sheaves. Slimakowa and Magda helped in the early morning and in the afternoon.

On the first day, while the five were working together, and had reached the top of the hill, Magda noticed some men showing against the dark background of the wood, and drew Slimakowa's attention to them. They all stopped work and looked.

'They must be peasants,' Maciek said; 'they are wearing white smocks.'

'They do not walk like peasants,' said Slimakowa.

'But they are wearing boots up to their knees,' said Slimak.

'Look! they are carrying poles,' Jendrek cried; 'and they are dragging a rope after them.'

'Ah, they must be surveyors. What can they be after?' reflected Slimak.

'Surely, they are taking a fresh survey; now, Josef, aren't you glad you did not buy that land?' asked his wife.

They took up their work again, but did not get on very fast, for they could not resist throwing sidelong glances at the approaching men. It was now quite plain that they were not peasants, for they wore white coats and had black ribbons on their hats. Slimak's attention became so absorbed that he lagged behind, in the place which Magda usually occupied, instead of being at the head of the party. At last he cried:

'Jendrek, stop cutting; run and find out what they are doing, and if they are really measuring for a new land-distribution.'

Jendrek was off in a moment, and had soon reached the men. He forgot to come back. The little party watched him talk to the men for a few moments, and then becoming busy with the poles.

'I say!' cried Slimakowa, 'he is quite one of the party! Just look, how he is running along with the line, as if he had never done anything else in his life. He has never seen a book except in the Jew's shop window, and yet he can run better than any of them. I wish I had told him to put on his boots; they will never take him for the son of a gospodarz.'

She watched Jendrek with great pride until the party disappeared behind the line of the hill.

'Something will come of this,' said Slimak, 'either good or bad.'

'Why should it be bad?' asked his wife; 'they may add to our land; what do you think, Maciek?'

The farm labourer looked embarrassed when he was asked for his opinion, and pondered until the perspiration flowed from his head.

'Why should it be good?' he said at last. 'When I was working for the squire at Krzeszowie, and he went bankrupt, just such men as these came and measured the land, and soon afterwards we had to pay a new tax. No good ever comes of anything new.'

Jendrek returned towards sunset, quite out of breath. He called out to his mother that the gentlemen wanted some milk, and had given him twenty kopeks.

'Give them to your mother at once,' said Slimak; 'they are not for you, but for the milk.'

Jendrek was almost in tears. 'Why should I give

up my money ? They say they will pay for everything they have, and even want to buy butter and fowls.'

'Are they traders ?'

'Oh no, they are great gentlemen, and live in a tent and keep a cook.'

'Gipsies, I dare say !'

Slimakowa had run off at top speed, and now the men appeared, perspiring, sunburnt, and dusty; nevertheless, they impressed Slimak and Maciek so much with their grand manner that they took off their caps.

'Which of you is the gospodarz ?'

'I am.'

'How long have you lived here ?'

'From my childhood.'

'And have you ever seen the river in flood ?'

'I should think I had !'

'Do you remember how high the water rises ?'

'Sometimes it overflows on to that meadow deep enough to drown a man.'

'Are you quite sure of that ?'

'Everybody knows that. Those gaps in the hill have been scooped out by the water.'

'The bridge will have to be sixty feet high.'

'Certainly,' said the elder of the two men. 'Can you let us have some milk, gospodarz ?'

'My wife is getting it ready, if it pleases the gentlemen to come.'

The whole party turned towards the cottage, for the drinking of milk by such distinguished gentlemen was an important event; it was decided to stop harvesting for the day.

Chairs and the cherrywood table had been placed in front of the cottage. A rye loaf, butter, white

cheese with caraway seeds, and a bowl of buttermilk were in readiness.

'Well,' said the men, looking at each other in surprise, 'a nobleman could not have received us better.'

They ate heartily, praised everything, and finally asked Slimakowa what they owed her.

'May it be to the gentlemen's health!'

'But we cannot fleece you like this, gospodyni.'

'We don't take money for hospitality. Besides, you have already given my boy as much as if he had been harvesting a whole day.'

'There!' whispered the younger man to the elder, 'isn't that like Polish peasants?'

To Slimak they said: 'After such a reception we will promise to build the station quite near to you.'

'I don't know what you mean?'

'We are going to build a railway.'

Slimak scratched his head.

'What makes you so doubtful?' asked the men.

'I'm thinking that this will turn out badly for us,' Slimak replied; 'I shan't earn anything by driving.'

The men laughed. 'Don't be afraid, my friend, it will be a very good thing for everybody, especially for you, as you will be near the station. And first of all you will sell us your produce and drive us. Let us begin at once, what do you want for your fowls?'

'I leave it to you, sir.'

'Twenty-five kopeks, then.'

Slimakowa looked at her husband. This was double the amount they had usually taken. 'You can have them, sir,' she cried.

'That scoundrel of a Jew charged us fifty,' murmured the younger man.

They agreed to buy butter, cheese, crayfish, cucumber, and bread; the younger man expressing surprise at the cheapness of everything, and the elder boasting that he always knew how to drive a good bargain. When they left, they paid Slimakowa sixteen paper roubles and half a silver rouble, asking her if she was sure that she was not cheating herself.

'God forbid,' she replied. 'I wish I could sell every day at that price.'

'You will, when we have built the railway.'

'May God bless you!' She made the sign of the cross over them, the farm labourer knelt down, and Slimak took off his cap. They all accompanied their guests as far as the ravines.

When they returned, Slimak set everyone to work in feverish haste.

'Jagna, get the butter ready; Maciek and Jendrek, go to the river for the crayfish; Magda, take three score of the finest cucumbers, and throw in an extra ten. Jesus Mary! Have we ever done business like this! You will have to buy yourself a new silkkerchief, and a new shirt for Jendrek.'

'Our luck has come,' said Slimakowa, 'and I must certainly buy a silkkerchief, or else no one in the village will believe that we have made so much money.'

'I don't quite like it that the new carriages will go without horses,' said Slimak; 'but that can't be helped.'

When they took their produce to the engineers' encampment, they received fresh orders, for there

were more than a dozen men, who made him their general purveyor. Slimak went round to the neighbouring cottages and bought what he needed, making a penny profit on every penny he spent, while his customers praised the cheapness of the produce. After a week the party moved further off, and Slimak found himself in possession of twenty-five roubles that seemed to have fallen from the sky, not counting what he had earned for the hire of his horses and cart, and payment for the days of labour he had lost. But somehow the money made him feel ashamed.

'Do you know, Jagna,' he said, 'perhaps we ought to go after the gentlemen and give them back their money.'

'Oh nonsense!' cried the woman, 'trading is always like that. What did the Jew charge for the chickens? just double your price.'

'But it is the Jew's trade, and besides, he isn't a Christian.'

'Therefore he makes the greater profits. Come, Josef, the gentlemen did not pay for the things only, but for the trouble you took.'

This, and the thought that everybody who came from Warsaw obviously had much money to spend, reassured the peasant.

As he and the rest of the family were so much occupied with their new duties, all the harvesting fell to Maciek's share. He had to go to the hill from early dawn till late at night, and cut, bind, and shock the sheaves single-handed. But in spite of his industry the work took longer than usual, and Slimak hired old Sobieska to help him. She came at six o'clock, armed with a bottle of 'remedy' for a wound in the leg, did the work of

two while she sang songs which made even Maciek blush, until the afternoon, and then took her 'remedy'. The cure then pulled her down so much that the scythe fell from her hand.

'Hey, gospodarz!' she would shout. 'You are raking in the money and buying your wife silk handkerchiefs, but the poor farm labourers have to creep on all fours. It 's "Cut the corn, Sobieska and Maciek, and I will brag about like a gentleman!" You will see, he will soon call himself "Pan Slimaczinski."[1] He is the devil's own son, for ever and ever. Amen.'

She would fall into a furrow and sleep until sundown, though she was paid for a full day's work. As she had a sharp tongue, Slimak had no wish to offend her. When he haggled about the money, she would kiss his hand and say: 'Why should you fall out with me, sir? Sell one chicken more and you'll be all right.'

'Cheek always pays!' thought Maciek.

On the following Sunday, when everyone was ready to go to church, Maciek sat down and sighed heavily.

'Why, Maciek, aren't you going to church?' asked Slimak, seeing that something was amiss.

'How can I go to church? You would be ashamed of me.'

'What 's the matter with you?'

'Nothing is the matter with me, but my feet keep coming through my boots.'

'That 's your own fault, why didn't you speak before? Your wages are due, and I will give you six roubles.'

Maciek embraced his feet. . . .

[1] The ending *ski* denotes nobility.

'But mind you buy the boots, and don't drink away the money.'

They all started; Slimak walked with his wife, Magda with the boys, and Maciek by himself at a little distance. He dreamt that Slimak would become a gentleman when the railway was finished, and that he, Maciek, would then wait at table, and perhaps get married. Then he crossed himself for having such reckless ideas. How could a poor fellow like him think of marrying? Who would have him? Probably not even Zoska, although she was wrong in the head and had a child.

This was a memorable Sunday for Slimak and his wife. She had bought a silkkerchief at a stall, given twenty kopeks to the beggars, and sat down in the front pew, where Grybina and Lukasiakowa had at once made room for her. As for Slimak, everyone had something to say to him. The publican reproached him for spoiling the prices for the Jews, the organist reminded him that it would be well to pay for an extra Mass for the souls of the departed, even the policeman saluted him, and the priest urged him to keep bees: 'You might come round to the Vicarage, now that you have money and spare time, and perhaps buy a few hives. It does no harm to remember God in one's prosperity and keep bees and give wax to the Church.'

Gryb came up with an unpleasant smile. 'Surely, Slimak, you will treat everybody all round to-day, since you've been so successful?'

'You don't treat the village when you have made a good bargain, neither shall I,' Slimak snubbed him.

'That 's not surprising, since I don't make as much profit on a cow as you make on a chicken.'

'All the same, you're richer than other people.'

'There you're right,' Wisniewski supported Slimak, asking him for the loan of a couple of roubles at the same time. But when Slimak refused, he complained of his arrogance.

Maciek did not get much comfort out of the money given him for boots. He stood humbly at the back of the church, so that the Lord should not see his torn sukmana. Then the beggars reminded him that he never gave them anything. He went to the public-house to get change.

'How about my money, Pan Maciek?' said the publican.

'What money?'

'Have you forgotten? You owe me two roubles since Christmas.'

Maciek swore at him. 'Everybody knows that one can only get a drink from you for cash.'

'That 's true on the whole. But when you were tipsy at Christmas, you embraced and kissed me so many times, I couldn't help myself and gave you credit.'

'Have you got witnesses?' Maciek said sharply. 'I tell you, old Jew, you won't take me in.'

The publican reflected for a moment.

'I have no witnesses,' he said, 'therefore I will never mention the matter to you again. Since you swear to me here in the presence of other people, that you did not kiss me and beg for credit, I make you a present of your debt, but it 's a shame,' the publican added, spitting, 'that a man, working for such a respectable gospodarz as Slimak,

should cheat a poor Jew. Don't ever set foot in my inn again!'

The labourer hesitated. Did he really owe that money?

'Well,' he said, 'since you say I owe you the money, I will give it you. But take care God does not punish you if you are wronging me.' In his heart, however, he doubted whether God would ever punish any one on account of such a low creature as he was.

He was just leaving the inn sadly, when a band of Galician harvesters came in. They sat down at the table, discussing the profits that would be made from the building of the new railway.

Maciek went up to them, and seeing that their appearance was not much less ragged than his own, he asked if it was true that there were railroads[1] in the world? 'No one,' he said, 'would have iron enough to cover roads, not even the government.'

The labourers laughed, but one, a huge fellow with a soldier's cap, said: 'What is there to laugh at? Of course a clodhopper does not know what a railway is. Sit down, brother, and I'll tell you all about it, but let's have a bottle of vodka.'

Before Maciek had decided, the publican had brought the vodka.

'Why shouldn't he have vodka?' he said, 'he is a good-natured fellow, he has stood treat before.'

What happened afterwards, Maciek did not clearly remember. He thought that some one told him how fast an engine goes, and that some one else shouted, he ought to buy boots. Later on he was seized by his arms and legs and carried to the stable. One thing was certain, he returned without

[1] The Polish word for 'railway' is 'iron road'.

a penny. Slimakowa would not look at him, and Slimak said: 'You are hopeless, Maciek, you'll never get on, for the devil always leads you into bad company.'

So it happened that Maciek went without new boots, but a few weeks later he acquired a possession he had never dreamt of.

It was a rainy September evening; the more the day declined, the heavier became the layers of clouds. Lower and lower they descended, torn and gloomy. Forest, hill, and valley, even the fence dissolved gradually into the grey veil. The heavy, persistent rain penetrated everything; the ground was full of it, soaked through like kneaded dough; the road was full of it, running with yellow streams; the yard, where it stood in large puddles, was full of it. Roofs and walls were dripping, the animals' skins and even human souls were saturated with it.

Everybody in the gospodarstwo was thinking vaguely of supper, but no one was in the mood for it. The gospodarz yawned, the gospodyni was cross, the boys were sleepy, Magda did even less than usual. They looked at the fire, where the potatoes were slowly boiling, at the door, to watch Maciek come in, or at the window, where the raindrops splashed, falling from the higher, the lower, and the lowest clouds, from the thatch, from the fading leaves of the trees, and from the window frames. When all these splashes mingled into one, they sounded like approaching footfalls. Then the cottage door creaked. 'Maciek,' muttered the gospodarz. But Maciek did not appear.

A hand was groping along the passage wall.

'What 's the matter with him, has he gone

blind ?' impatiently exclaimed the gospodyni, and opened the door.

Something which was not Maciek was standing in the passage, a shapeless figure, not tall, but bulky. It was wrapped in a soaking wet shawl. Slimakowa stepped back for a moment, but when the firelight fell into the passage, she discerned a human face in the opening of the shawl, copper-coloured, with a broad nose and slanting eyes that were hardly visible under the swollen eyelids.

'The Lord be praised,' said a hoarse voice.

'You, Zoska ?' asked the astonished gospodyni.

'It is I.'

'Come in quickly, you are letting all the damp into the room.'

The new-comer stepped forward, but stood still, irresolutely. She held a child in her arms whose face was as white as chalk, with blue lips ; she drew out one of its arms ; it looked like a stick.

'What are you doing out in weather like this ?' asked Slimak.

'I'm going after a place.' She looked round, and decided to crouch down on the floor, near the wall. 'They say in the village that you have a lot of money now ; I thought you might want a girl.'

'We don't want a girl, there is not even enough for Magda to do. Why are you out of a place ?'

'I've been harvesting in the summer, but now no one will take me in with the child. If I were alone I could get along.'

Maciek came in, and not being aware of Zoska's presence, started on seeing a crouching form on the floor.

'What do you want ?' he asked.

'I thought Slimak might take me on, but he doesn't want me with the child.'

'Oh Lord!' sighed the man, moved by the sight of poverty greater than his own.

'Why, Maciek, that sounds as if you had a bad conscience,' said the gospodyni disagreeably.

'It makes one feel bad, to see such wretchedness,' he murmured.

'The man whose fault it is would feel it most!'

'It isn't my fault, but I'm sorry for them all the same.'

'Why don't you take the child, then, if you are so sorry?' sneered Slimakowa, 'you'll give him the child, Zoska, won't you? Is it a boy?'

'A girl,' whispered Zoska, with her eyes fixed on Maciek, 'she is two years old . . . yes, he can have her, if he likes.'

'She'd be a deal of trouble to me,' muttered the labourer, 'all the same, it's a pity.'

'Take her,' repeated Zoska, 'Slimak is rich, you are rich. . . .'

'Oh yes, Maciek is rich,' laughed Slimakowa, 'he drinks through six roubles in one Sunday.'

'If you can drink through six roubles, you can take her,' Zoska cried vehemently, pulling the child out of the shawl and laying it on the floor. It looked frightened, but did not utter a sound.

'Shut up, Jagna, and don't talk nonsense,' said Slimak. Zoska stood up and stretched herself.

'Now I shall be easy for once,' she said, 'I've often thought I'd like to throw her away into a ditch, but you may as well have her. Mind you look after her properly! If I come back and don't find her, I'll scratch out your eyes.'

'You are crazy,' said Slimak, 'cross yourself.'

'I won't cross myself, I'll go away. . . .'

'Don't be a fool, and sit down to supper,' angrily cried the gospodyni. She took the saucepan off so impetuously, that the hot ashes flew all over the stove, and one touched Zoska's bare feet.

'Fire! . . . fire!' she shouted, and escaped from the room, 'the cottage is on fire, everything is on fire!'

She staggered out like a drunken person, and they could hear her voice farther and farther off, shouting 'Fire!' until the rain drowned it.

'Run, Maciek, and bring her back,' cried Slimakowa. But Maciek did not stir.

'You can't send a man after a mad woman on a night like this,' said Slimak.

'Well, what am I to do with this dog's child? Do you think I shall feed her?'

'I dare say you won't throw her over the fence. You needn't worry, Zoska will come back for her.'

'I don't want her here for the night.'

'Then what are you going to do with her?' said Slimak, getting angry.

'I'll take her to the stable,' Maciek said in a low voice, lifting the child up awkwardly. He sat down on the bench with it and rocked it gently on his knees. There was silence in the room. Presently Magda, Jendrek, and Stasiek emerged from their corner and stood by Maciek, looking at the little creature.

'She is as thin as a lath,' whispered Magda.

'She doesn't move or look at us,' remarked Jendrek.

'You must feed her from a rag,' advised Magda, 'I will find you a clean one.'

'Sit down to supper,' ordered Slimakowa, but

her voice sounded less angry. She looked at the child, first from a distance, then she bent over it and touched its drawn yellow skin.

'That bitch of a mother!' she murmured, 'Magda, put a little milk in a saucer, and you, Maciek, sit down to supper.'

'Let Magda sit down, I'll feed her myself.'

'Feed her!' cried Magda, 'he doesn't even know how to hold her.' She tried to take the child from him.

'Don't pull her to pieces,' said the gospodyni, 'pour out the milk and let Maciek feed her, if he is so keen on it.'

The way in which Maciek performed his task elicited much advice from Magda. 'He has poured the milk all over her mouth . . . it's running on to the floor . . . why do you stick the rag into her nose?'

Although he felt that he was making a bad nurse, Maciek would not let the child out of his hands. He hastily ate a little soup, left the rest, and went to his night-quarters in the stable, sheltering the child under his sukmana. When he entered, one of the horses neighed, and the other turned his head and sniffed at the child in the darkness.

'That 's right, greet the new stable-boy who can't even hold a whip,' laughed Maciek.

The rain continued to fall. When Slimak looked out later on, the stable door was shut, and he fancied he could hear Maciek snoring.

He returned into the room.

'Are they all right in there?' asked his wife.

'They are asleep,' he replied, and bolted the door.

The cocks had crowed midnight, the dog had barked his answer and squeezed under the cart for shelter, everybody was asleep. Then the stable door creaked, and a shadow stole out, moved along the walls and disappeared into the cowshed. It was Maciek. He drew the whimpering child from under his sukmana and put its mouth to the cow's udder.

'Suck, little one,' he whispered, 'suck the cow, because your mother has left you.'

A few moments later smacking sounds were heard.

And the rain continued to drip . . . drip . . . drip, monotonously.

CHAPTER VI

The announcement that the railway was to be built in the spring caused a great stir in the village. The strangers who went about buying land from the peasants were the sole topic of conversation at the spinning-wheels on winter evenings. One poor peasant had sold his barren gravel hill, and had been able to purchase ten acres of the best land with the proceeds.

The squire and his wife had returned in December, and it was rumoured that they were going to sell the property. The squire was playing the American organ all day long, as usual, and only laughed when the people timidly asked him whether there was any truth in the report. It was the lady who had told her maid in the evening how gay the life in Warsaw would be; an hour

later the bailiff's clerk, who was the maid's sweetheart, knew of it; early the next morning the clerk repeated it to the bailiff and to the foreman as a great secret, and by the afternoon all the employés and labourers were discussing the great secret. In the evening it had reached the inn, and then rapidly spread into the cottages and to the small town.

The power of the little word 'Sale' was truly marvellous.

It made the farm labourers careless in their work and the bailiff give notice at New Year; it made the mute hard-working animals grow lean, the sheaves disappear from the barn and the corn from the granary; it made off with the reserve cart-wheels and harnesses, pulled the padlocks off the buildings, took planks out of the fences, and on dark nights it swallowed up now a chicken, now even a sheep or a small pig, and sent the servants to the public-house every night.

A great, a sonorous word! It sounded far and wide, and from the little town came the tradespeople, presenting their bills. It was written on the face of every man, in the sad eyes of the neglected beasts, on all the doors and on the broken window-panes, plastered up with paper. There were only two people who pretended not to hear it, the gentleman who played the American organ and the lady who dreamt of going to Warsaw. When the neighbours asked them, he shrugged his shoulders, and she sighed and said: 'We should like to sell, it 's dull living in the country, but my father in Warsaw has not yet had an offer.'

Slimak, who often went to work at the manor, had also heard the rumour, but he did not believe

it. When he met the squire he would look at him and think: 'He can't help being as he is, but if such a misfortune should befall him, I should be grieved for him. They have been settled at the manor from father to son; half the churchyard is full of them, they have all grown up here. Even a stone would fret if it were moved from such a place, let alone a man. Surely, he can't be bankrupt like other noblemen? It 's well known that he has money.'

The peasant judged his squire by himself. He did not know what it meant to have a young wife who was bored in the country.

While Slimak put his trust in the squire's unruffled manner, cogitations were going on at the inn under the guidance of Josel, the publican.

One morning, half-way through January, old Sobieska burst into the cottage. Although the winter sun had not yet begun to look round the world, the old woman was flushed, and her eyes looked bloodshot. Her lean chest was insufficiently covered by a sheepskin as old as herself and a torn chemise.

'Here! . . . give me some vodka and I'll give you a little bit of news,' she called out. Slimak was just going off to thresh, but he sat down again and asked his wife to bring the vodka, for he knew that the old woman usually knew what she was talking about.

She drank a large glassful, stamped her foot, gurgled 'Oo-ah!', wiped her mouth and said: 'I say! the squire is going to sell everything.'

The thought of his field crossed Slimak's mind and made his blood run cold, but he answered calmly: 'Gossip!'

'Gossip?' the old woman hiccoughed, 'I tell you, it's gospel truth, and I'll tell you more: the richer gospodarze are settling with Josel and Gryb to buy the whole estate and the whole village from the squire, so help me God!'

'How can they settle that without me?'

'Because they want to keep you out. They say you will be better off as it is, because you will be nearer to the station, and that you have already made a lot of money by spoiling other people's business.'

She drained another glass and would have said more, but was suddenly overcome, and had to be carried out of the room by Slimak.

He and his wife consulted for the rest of the day what would be the best thing to do under the circumstances. Towards evening he put on his new sukmana lined with sheepskin and went to the inn.

Gryb and Lukasiak were sitting at the table. By the light of the two tallow candles they looked like two huge boundary-stones in their grey clothes. Josel stood behind the bar in a dirty jersey with black stripes. He had a sharp nose, pointed beard, pointed curls, and wore a peaked cap; there was something pointed also in his look.

'The Lord be praised,' said Slimak.

'In Eternity,' Josel answered indifferently.

'What are the gospodarze drinking?'

'Tea,' the innkeeper replied.

'Then I will have tea too, but let it be as black as pitch, and with plenty of arrac.'

'Have you come to drink tea with us?' Josel taunted him.

'No,' said Slimak, slowly sitting down, 'I've come to find out. . . .'

'What old Sobieska meant,' finished the innkeeper in an undertone.

'How about this business? is it true that you are buying land from the squire?' asked Slimak.

The two gospodarze exchanged glances with Josel, who smiled. After a pause Lukasiak replied:

'Oh, we are talking of it for want of something better to do, but who would have the money for such a big undertaking?'

'You two between you could buy it!'

'Perhaps we may, but it would be for ourselves and those living in the village.'

'What about me?'

'You don't take us into your confidence about your business affairs, so mind you keep out of ours.'

'It 's not only your affair, but concerns the whole village.'

'No, it 's nobody's but mine,' snapped Gryb.

'It 's mine just as much.'

'That is not so!' Gryb struck the table with his fist: if I don't like a man, he shan't buy, and there 's an end of it.'

The publican smiled. Seeing that Slimak was getting pale with anger, Lukasiak took Gryb by the arm.

'Let us go home, neighbour,' he said. 'What is the good of talking about things that may never come off? Come along.'

Gryb looked at Josel and got up.

'So you are going to buy without me?' asked Slimak.

'You bought without us last summer.' They shook hands with the innkeeper and took no notice of Slimak.

Josel looked after them until their footsteps could no longer be heard, then, still smiling, he turned to Slimak.

'Do you see now, gospodarz, that it is a bad thing to take the bread out of a Jew's mouth? I have lost fifty roubles through you and you have made twenty-five, but you have bought a hundred roubles' worth of trouble, for the whole village is against you.'

'They really mean to buy the squire's land without me?'

'Why shouldn't they? What do they care about your loss if they can gain?'

'Well . . . well,' muttered the peasant sadly.

'I,' said Josel, 'might perhaps be able to arrange the affair for you, but what should I gain by it? You have never been well disposed towards me, and you have already done me harm.'

'So you won't arrange it?'

'I might, but on my own terms.'

'What are they?'

'First of all you will give me back the fifty roubles. Secondly, you will build a cottage on your land for my brother-in-law.'

'What for?'

'He will keep horses and drive people to and from the station.'

'And what am I to do with my horses?'

'You have your land.'

The gospodarz got up. 'Aren't you going to give me any tea?'

'I haven't any in the house.'

'Very well; I won't pay you fifty roubles, and I won't build a cottage for your brother-in-law.'

'Do as you please.' Slimak left the inn, banging the door.

Josel turned his pointed nose and beard in his direction and smiled.

In the darkness Slimak collided with a labourer from the manor who carried a sack of corn on his back; presently he saw one of the servant girls hiding a goose under her sheepskin. When she recognized him she ran behind the fence. But Josel continued to smile. He smiled, when he paid the labourer a rouble for the corn, including the sack; he smiled, when the girl handed over the goose and got a bottle of sour beer in return; he smiled, when he listened to the gospodarze discussing the purchase of the land, and he smiled when he paid old Gryb two roubles per cent., and took two roubles from young Gryb for every ten he lent him. His smile no more came off his face than his dirty jersey came off his back.

The fire was out and the children were asleep when Slimak returned home.

'Well?' asked his wife, while he was undressing in the dark.

'This is a trick of Josel's. He drives the others like a team of oxen.'

'They won't let you in?'

'They won't, but I shall go to the squire about the field.'

'When are you going?'

'To-morrow, else it may be too late.'

To-morrow came; the day after came and

went; a week passed, but Slimak had not yet done anything. One day he said he must thresh for a corn dealer, the other day that he had a pain inside.

As a matter of fact, he neither threshed nor had a pain inside; but something held him back which peasants call being afraid, gentlemen slackness, and scholars inertia.

He ate little, wandered round aimlessly, and often stood still in the snow-covered field by the river, struggling with himself. Reason told him that he ought to go to the manor and settle the matter, but another power held him fast and whispered: 'Don't hurry, wait another day, it will all come right somehow.'

'Josef, why don't you go to the squire?' his wife asked day after day.

One evening old Sobieska turned up again. She was suffering from rheumatism, and required treatment with a 'thimbleful' of vodka which loosened her tongue.

'It was like this,' she began: 'Gryb and Lukasiak went with Grochowski, all three dressed as for a Corpus Christi procession. The squire received them in the bailiff's office, and Gryb cleared his throat and went for it. "We have heard, sir, that you are going to sell your family estate. Every man has a right to sell, and the other to buy. But it would be a pity to allow the land which your forefathers possessed, and which we peasants have cultivated, to fall into the hands of strangers who have no associations with old times. Therefore, sir, sell the land to us." I tell you,' Sobieska continued, 'he talked for an hour, like the priest in the pulpit; at last Lukasiak got

stiff in the back[1], and they all burst out crying. Then they embraced the squire's feet, and he took their heads between his hands[2] and . . .'

'Well, and are they buying?' Slimak interrupted impatiently.

'Why shouldn't they buy? Certainly they are buying. They are not yet quite agreed as to the price, for the squire wants a hundred roubles an acre, and the peasants are offering fifty; but they cried so much, and talked so long about good feeling between peasants and landowners that the gospodarze will add another ten, and the squire will let them off the rest. Josel has told them to give that much and no more, and not to be in a hurry, then they'll be sure to drive a good bargain. He 's a damned clever Jew! Since he has taken the matter in hand, people have flocked to the inn as if the Holy Mother were workin miracles there.'

'Is he still setting the others against me?'

'He is not actually setting them against you, but he puts in a word now and then that you can no longer count as a gospodarz, since you have taken to trading. The others are even more angry with you than he is; they can't forget that you sold chickens at just double the price you bought them for.'

The result of this news was that Slimak set out for the manor-house early the next day, and returned depressed in the afternoon. A large bowl of sauerkraut presently made him willing to discourse.

'It was like this: I arrive at the manor, and

[1] The peasants would stand bent all the time.

[2] A nobleman, in order to show goodwill to his subordinates, slightly presses their heads between his hands.

when I look up I see that all the windows of the large room on the ground floor are wide open. God forbid! has some one died? I think to myself. I peep in and see Mateus, the footman, in a white apron with brushes on his feet, skating up and down like the boys on the ice. "The Lord be praised, Mateus, what are you doing?" I say. "In Eternity, I am polishing the floor," says he; "we are going to have a big dance here to-night." "Is the squire up yet?" "He is up, but the tailor is with him; he is trying on a Crakovian costume. My lady is going to be a gipsy." "I want him to sell me that field," I say. Mateus says: "Don't be a fool! how can the squire think of your field, when he is amusing himself making up as a Crakovian." So I go away from the window and stand about near the kitchen for a bit. They are bustling like anything, the fire is burning like a forge, and the butter is hissing. Presently Ignaz, the kitchen boy, comes out, covered with blood, as if he had been stuck. "Ignaz, for God's sake, what have you been doing?" I ask. "I haven't been doing anything; it's the cook, he's been boxing my ears with a dead duck." "The Lord be praised it is not your blood. Tell me where I can find the squire." "Wait here," he says, "they'll bring in the boar, and the squire is sure to come and have a look at it." Ignaz runs off, and I wait and wait, until the shivers run down my back. But still I wait.'

'Well, and did you see the squire?' Slimakowa asked impatiently.

'Of course I saw him.'

'Did you speak to him?'

'Rather!'

'What did you settle?'

'Well . . . ah . . . I told him I wanted to beg a favour of him about the field, but he said, "Oh, leave me alone, I have no head for business to-day."'

'And when will you go again?'

Slimak held up his hands: 'Perhaps to-morrow, or the day after, when they have slept off their dance.'

That same day Maciek drove a sledge to the forest, taking with him an axe, a bite of food, and 'Silly Zoska's' daughter. The mother had never asked after her, and Maciek had mothered the child; he fed her, took her to the stable with him at night and to his work in the day-time.

The child was so weak that it hardly ever uttered a sound. Every one, especially Sobieska, had predicted her early death.

'She won't last a week.' . . . 'She'll die to-morrow.' . . . 'She 's as good as gone already.'

But she had lived through the week and longer, and even when she had been taken for dead once, she opened her tired eyes to the world again. Maciek paid no attention to these prognostications. 'Never fear,' he said, 'nothing will happen to her.' He continued to feed her in the cowshed after dark.

'What makes you take trouble about that wretched child, Maciek?' Slimakowa would say; 'if you talked to her about the Blessed Bible itself she would take no notice; she 's dreadfully stupid, I never saw such a noodle in all my life.'

'She doesn't talk, because she has sense,' said Maciek; 'when she begins to talk she will be as wise as an old man.'

That was because Maciek was in the habit of talking to her about his work, whatever he might

be doing, manuring, threshing, or patching his clothes.

To-day he was taking her with him to the forest, tied to the sledge, and wrapt in the remnants of his old sheepskin and a shawl. Uphill and downhill over the hummocks bumped the sledge, until they arrived on level ground, where the slanting rays of the sun, endlessly reflected from the snow-crystals, fell into their eyes. The child began to cry.

Maciek turned her sideways, scolding: 'Now then, I told you to shut your eyes! No man, and if he were the bishop himself, can look at the sun; it 's God's lantern. At daybreak the Lord Jesus takes it into his hand and has a look round his gospodarstwo. In the winter, when the frost is hard, he takes a short cut and sleeps longer. But he makes up for it in the summer, and looks all over the world till eight o'clock at night. That 's why one should be astir from daybreak till sunset. But you may sleep longer, little one, for you aren't much use yet. Woa!' They entered the forest. 'Here we are! this is the forest, and it belongs to the squire. Slimak has bought a cartload of wood, and we must get it home before the roads are too bad. Steady, lads!' They stopped by a square pile of wood. Maciek untied the child and put her in a sheltered place, took out a bottle of milk and put it to her lips. 'Drink it and get strong, there will be some work for you. The logs are heavy, and you must lift them into the sledge. You don't want the milk? Naughty girl! Call out when you want it. . . . A little child like that makes things cheerful for a man,' he reflected. 'Formerly there never was any one to open one's mouth to, now one can talk all the time. Now watch how the work

should be done. Jendrek would pull the logs about, and get tired in no time and stop. But mind you take them from the top, carefully, and lift them into the sledge, one by one like this. Never be in a hurry, little one, or else the damned wood will tire you out. It doesn't want to go on to the sledge, for it has sense, and knows what to expect. We all prefer our own corner of the world, even if it is a bad one. But to you and me it 's all the same, we have no corner of our own ; die here or die there, it makes no difference.' Now and then he rested, or tucked the child up more closely.

Meanwhile, the sky had reddened, and a strong north-west wind sprang up, saturated with moisture. The forest, held in its winter sleep, slowly began to move and to talk. The green pine needles trembled, then the branches and boughs began to sway and beckon to each other. The tops, and finally the stems rocked forward and backward, as if they contemplated starting on a march. It was as if their eternal fixedness grieved them, and they were setting out in a tumultuous crowd to the ends of the world. Sometimes they became motionless near the sledge, as though they did not wish to betray their secret to a human being. Then the tramp of countless feet, the march past of whole columns of the right wing, could be heard distinctly ; they approached, and passed at a distance. The left wing followed ; the snow creaked under their footsteps, they were already in a line with the sledge. The middle column, emboldened, began to call in mighty whispers. Then they halted angrily, stood still in their places and seemed to roar : ' Go away ! go away, and do not hinder us ! '

But Maciek was only a poor labourer, and though he was afraid of the giants, and would gladly have made room for them, he could not leave until he had loaded up his sledge. He did not rest now or rub his frozen hands ; he worked as fast as he could, so that the night and the winter storms should not overtake him.

The sky grew darker and darker with clouds ; mists rose in the forests and froze into fine crystals which instantly covered Maciek's sukmana, the child's shawl, and the horses' manes with a crackling crust. The logs became so slippery that his hands could scarcely hold them ; the ground was like glass. He looked anxiously towards the setting sun: it was dangerous to return with a heavy load when the roads were in that condition. He crossed himself, put the child into the sledge, and whipped up the horses. Maciek stood in fear of many things, but most of all he feared the overturning of a sledge or cart, and being crushed underneath.

When they were out of the wood the track became worse and worse. The rough-hewn runners constantly sank into snow-drifts and the sledge canted over, so that the poor man, trembling with fear and cold, had to prop it up with all his strength. If his twisted foot gave way, there was an end to him and the child.

From time to time the horses stopped dead, and Maciek ceased shouting. Then a great silence spread round him, only the distant roar of the forest, the whistling of the wind, and the whimpering of the child could be heard.

' Woa ! ' he began again, and the horses tugged and slipped where they stood, moved on a few steps, and stopped again.

'To Thy protection we flee, Holy Mother of God!' he whispered, took his axe and cut into the smooth road in front of the horses.

It took him a long time to cover the short distance to the high road, but when they got there, the horses refused to go on at all. The hill in front of them was impassable. He sat down on the sledge, pondering whether Slimak would come to his assistance, or leave him to his fate. 'He'll come for the horses; don't cry, little one, God won't forsake us.' While he listened, it seemed to him as if the whistling of the wind changed into the sound of bells. Was it his fancy? But the bells never ceased; some were deep-toned and some high-toned; voices were intermixed with them. They approached from behind like a swarm of bees in the summer.

'What can it be?' said Maciek, and stood up.

Small flames shone in the distance. They disappeared among the juniper bushes, and then flickered up again, now high, now low, coming nearer and nearer, until a number of objects, running at full speed, could be seen in the uncertain light of the flames. The tumult of voices increased; Maciek heard the clattering of hoofs, the cracking of whips.

'Heh! stop . . . there 's a hill there!'

'Look out! don't be crazy!'

'Stop the sledge, I shall get out!'

'No, go on!'

'Jesus Mary!'

'Have the musicians been spilt yet?'

'Not yet, but they will be.'

'Oh . . . la la!'

Maciek now understood that this was a sleigh

race. The teams of two- and four-horsed sleighs approached at a gallop, accompanied by riders on horseback carrying torches. In the thick mist it looked as if the procession appeared out of an abyss through a circular gate of fire. They bore straight down upon the spot where Maciek and his sledge had come to a standstill. Suddenly the first one stopped.

'Hey . . . what 's that ? '

'Something is in the way.'

'What is it ? '

'A peasant with a cartload of wood.'

'Out of the way, dog. Throw him into the ditch ! '

'Shut up ! We'd better move him on.'

'That we will ! We are going to move the peasant on. Out of your sledges, gentlemen ! '

Before Maciek had recovered from his astonishment, he was surrounded by masked men in rich costumes with plumed hats, swords, guitars, or brooms. They seized his sledge and himself, pushed them to the top of the hill and down the other side on to level ground.

'Thank God ! ' thought the dazed man. 'If the devil hadn't led them this way, I might have been here till the morning. They are fine fellows ! '

'The ladies are afraid to drive down the hill,' some one shouted from the distance.

'Then let them get out and walk ! '

'The sledges had better not go down.'

'Why not ? Go on, Antoni ! '

'I don't advise it, sir.'

'Then get off and be hanged ! I'll drive myself ! '

Bells jingled violently, and a one-horse sledge passed Maciek like a whirlwind. He crossed himself.

'Drive on, Andrei!'

'Stop, Count! It 's too risky!'

'Go on!'

Another sledge flew past.

'Bravo! Sporting fellow!'

'Drive on, Jacent!'

Two sledges were racing each other, a driver and a mask in each. The mad race had made the road sufficiently safe for the other empty sledges to pass with greater caution.

'Now give your arm to the ladies! A polonaise! Musicians!'

The outriders with torches posted themselves along the road, the musicians tuned up, and couple after couple detached itself from the darkness like an iridescent apparition. They hovered past to the melancholy strains of the Oginski polonaise.

Maciek took off his cap, drew the child from under the sheepskin and stood beside his sledge.

'Now look, you'll never see anything so beautiful again. Don't be afraid!'

An armoured and visored man passed.

'Do you see that knight? Formerly people like that conquered half the world, now there are none of them left.'

A grey-bearded senator passed.

'Look at him! People used to fear his judgement, but there are none like him left! That one, as gaudy as a woodpecker, was a great nobleman once; he did nothing but drink and dance; he could drain a barrel at a bout, and he spent so much money that he had to sell his family estate, poor wretch! There 's a Uhlan; they used to fight for Napoleon and conquer all the nations, but there are no fighters left in the world. There 's a chimney

sweep and a peasant . . . but in reality they are all gentlemen amusing themselves.'

The procession passed ; fainter and fainter grew the strains of the Oginski polonaise ; with shouts and laughter the masks got back into the sleighs, hoofs clattered and whips cracked.

Maciek started cautiously homeward in the wake of the jingling sleighs. Distant flames were still twinkling ahead, and the wind carried faint sounds of merriment back to him. Then all was silent.

' Are they doing right ? ' he murmured, perturbed.

For he recalled the portrait of the grey-headed senator in the choir of the church ; he had even prayed to it sometimes. . . . The bald-headed nobleman was there too, whom the peasants called ' the cursed man ', and the knight in armour who was lying on his tomb beside the altar of the Holy Martyr Apollonius. Then he remembered the friar who walked through the Vistula, and Queen Jadwiga who had brought salt from Hungary. And by the side of all these he saw his own old wise grandfather, Roch Owczarz, who had been a soldier under Napoleon, and came home without a penny, and in his old age became sacristan at the church, and explained all the pictures to the gospodarze so beautifully that he earned more money than the organist.

' The Lord rest his soul eternally ! '

And now these noblemen were amusing themselves with sacred matters ! What would they do next ? . . .

Slimak met him when he was about a verst from the cottage.

' We have been wondering if you had got stuck

on the hill. Thank God you are safe. Did you see the sleigh race ?'

'Oho !' said Maciek.

'I wonder they did not smash you to pieces.'

'Why should they ? They even helped me up the hill.'

'Dear me ! And they didn't pull you about ?'

'They only pulled my cap over my ears.'

'That is just like them ; either they will smash you up, or else be kindness itself, it just depends what temper they're in.'

'But the way they drove down those hills made one's flesh creep. No sober man would have come out of it alive.'

Two sledges now overtook them ; there was one traveller in the first and two in the second.

'Can you tell me where that sleigh party was driving to ?' asked the occupant of the first.

'To the squire's.'

'Indeed ! . . . Do you know if Josel, the innkeeper, is at home ?'

'I dare say he is, unless he is off on some swindle or other.'

'Do you know if your squire has sold his estate yet ?' asked a guttural voice from the second sledge.

'You shouldn't ask him such a question, Fritz,' remonstrated his companion.

'Oh ! the devil take the whole business !' replied Fritz.

'Aha, here they are again !' said Slimak.

'What do all those Old Testament Jews want ?' asked Maciek.

'There was only one Jew, the others are Germans from Wolka.'

'The gentlefolks never have any peace; no sooner do they want to enjoy themselves, then the Jews drive after them,' said Maciek.

Indeed, the sledges conveying the travellers were now with difficulty driving towards the valley, and presently stopped at Josel's inn.

Barrels of burning pitch in front of the manor house threw a rosy glare over the wintry landscape; distant sounds of music came floating on the air.

Josel came out and directed the Jew's sledge to the manor. The Germans got out, and one of them shouted after the departing Jew: 'You will see nothing will come of it; they are amusing themselves.'

'Well, and what of that?'

'A nobleman does not give up a dance for a business interview.'

'Then he will sell without it.'

'Or put you off.'

'I have no time for that.'

The façade of the manor-house glowed as in a bengal light; the sleigh-bells were still tinkling in the yard, where the coachmen were quarrelling over accommodation for their horses. Crowds of village people were leaning against the railings to watch the dancers flit past the windows, and to catch the strains of the music. Around all this noise, brightness, and merriment lay the darkness of the winter night, and from the winter night emerged slowly the sledge, carrying the silent, meditating Jew.

His modest conveyance stopped at the gate, and he dragged himself to the kitchen entrance; his whole demeanour betrayed great mental and

physical tiredness. He tried to attract the attention of the cook, but failed entirely; the kitchen-maid also turned her back on him. At last he got hold of a boy who was hurrying across to the pantry, seized him by the shoulders, and pressed a twenty kopek-piece into his hand.

'You shall have another twenty kopeks if you will bring the footman.'

'Does your honour know Mateus?' The boy scrutinized him sharply.

'I do, bring him here.'

Mateus appeared without delay.

'Here is a rouble for you; ask your master if he will see me, and I will double it.' The footman shook his head.

'The master is sure to refuse.'

'Tell him, it is Pan Hirschgold, on urgent business from my lady's father. Here is another rouble, so that you do not forget the name.'

Mateus quickly disappeared, but did not quickly return. The music stopped, yet he did not return; a polka followed, yet he did not return. At last he appeared: 'The master asks you to come to the bailiff's office.' He took Pan Hirschgold into a room where several camp-beds had been made up for the guests. The Jew took off his expensive fur, sat down in an armchair by the fire and meditated.

The polka had been finished, and a vigorous mazurka began. The tumult and stamping increased from time to time; commands rang out, and were followed by a noise which shook the house from top to bottom. The Jew listened indifferently, and waited without impatience.

Suddenly there was a great commotion in the

passage; the door was opened impetuously, and the squire entered.

He was dressed as a Crakovian peasant in a red coat covered with jingling ornaments, wide, pink-and-white-striped breeches, a red cap with a peacock's feather, and iron-shod shoes.

'How are you, Pan Hirschgold?' he cried good-humouredly, 'what is this urgent message from my father-in-law?'

'Read it, sir.'

'What, now? I'm dancing a mazurka.'

'And I am building a railway.'

The squire bit his lip, and quickly ran his eye over the letter. The noise of the dancers increased.

'You want to buy my estate?'

'Yes, and at once, sir.'

'But you see that I am giving a dance.'

'The colonists are waiting to come in, sir. If you cannot settle with me before midnight, I shall settle with your neighbour. He gains, and you lose.'

The squire was becoming feverish.

'My father-in-law recommends you highly . . . all the same, . . . on the spur of the moment. . . .'

'You need only write a word or two.'

The squire dashed his red cap down on the table. 'Really, Pan Hirschgold, this is unbearable!'

'It 's not my fault; I should like to oblige you, but business is pressing.'

There was another hubbub in the passage, and the Uhlan burst into the room. 'For heaven's sake, what are you doing, Wladek?'

'Urgent business.'

'But your lady is waiting for you!'

'Do arrange for some one to take my place; I tell you, it 's urgent.'

'I don't know how the lady will take it!' cried the retreating Uhlan.

The powerful bass voice of the leader of the mazurka rang out: 'Ladies' ronde!'

'How much will you give me?' hastily began the squire. 'Rather an original situation!' he unexpectedly added, with humour.

'Seventy-five roubles an acre. This is my highest offer. To-morrow I should only give sixty-seven.'

'En avant!' from the ball-room.

'Never!' cried the squire, 'I should prefer to sell to the peasants.'

'And get fifty, or at the outside sixty.'

'Or go on managing the estate myself.'

'You are doing that now . . . what is the result?'

'What do you mean?' said the squire irritably, 'it 's excellent soil. . . .'

'I know all about the property,' interrupted the Jew, 'from the bailiff who left at New Year.'

The squire became angry. 'I can sell to the colonists myself.'

'They may give sixty-seven, but meanwhile my lady is dying of boredom.'

'Chaîne to the left!'

The squire became desperate. 'God, what am I to do?'

'Sign the agreement. Your father-in-law advises you to do so, and tells you that I shall pay the highest price.'

'Partagez!'

Again the Uhlan violently burst into the room.

'Wladek, you really must come; the Count is mortally offended, and says he will take his fiancée away.'

'Oh, confound it! Pan Hirschgold, write the agreement at once, I will be back directly.'

Unmindful of the gaiety of the dance, the Jew calmly took an inkpot, pen, and paper out of his bag, wrote a dozen lines, and sat down, waiting for the noise to subside.

A quarter of an hour later the squire returned in the best of spirits.

'Ready?' he asked cheerfully.

'Ready.'

The squire read the paper, signed, and said with a smile:

'What, do you think, is the value of this agreement?'

'Perhaps the legal value is not great, but it has some value for your father-in-law, and he . . . well, he is a rich man!'

He blew on the signature, folded up the paper, and asked with a shade of irony: 'Well, and the Count?'

'Oh, he is pacified.'

'He will want more pacifying presently, when his creditors become annoying. I wish you a pleasant night, sir.'

No sooner had the squire left the room, than Mateus, the footman, appeared, as if the ground had produced him. He helped the Jew into his coat.

'Did you buy the estate, sir?'

'Why shouldn't I? It 's not the first, nor will it be the last.'

He gave the footman three roubles. Mateus

bowed to the ground and offered to call his sledge.

'Oh no, thank you,' said the Jew, 'I have left my own sledge in Warsaw, and I am not anxious to parade this wretched conveyance.'

Nevertheless, Mateus attended him deferentially into the yard.

In the ballroom polkas, valses, and mazurkas followed each other endlessly until the pale dawn appeared, and the cottage fires were lit.

Slimak rose with the winter sun, and whispering a prayer, walked out of the gate. He looked at the sky, then towards the manor-house, wondering how long the merrymaking was going to last.

The sky was blue, the first sun rays were bathing the snow in rose colour, and the clouds in purple. Slimak drew a deep breath, and felt that it was better to be out in the fresh air than indoors, dancing.

'Making themselves tired without need,' he thought, 'when they might be sleeping to their hearts' content!' Then he resumed his prayer. His attention was attracted by voices, and he saw two men in navy blue overcoats. When they caught sight of him, one asked at once:

'That is your hill, gospodarz, isn't it?'

Slimak looked at them in surprise.

'Why do you keep on asking me about my property? I told you last summer that the hill was mine.'

'Then sell it to us,' said the man with the beard.

'Wait, Fritz,' interrupted the older man.

'Oh bother! are you going to gossip again, father?'

'Look here, gospodarz,' said the father, 'we

have bought the squire's estate. Now we want this hill, because we want to build a windmill. . . .'

'Gracious!' exclaimed the son disagreeably, 'have you lost your senses, father? Listen! we want that land!'

'My land?' the peasant repeated in amazement, looking about him, 'my land?'

He hesitated for a moment, not knowing what to say. 'What right have you gentlemen to my land?'

'We have got money.'

'Money? . . . I! . . . Sell my land for money? We have been settled here from father to son; we were here at the time of the scourge of serfdom, and even then we used to call the land "ours". My father got it for his own by decree from the Emperor Alexander II; the Land Commission settled all that, and we have the proper documents with signatures attached. How can you say now that you want to buy my land?'

The younger man had turned away indifferently during Slimak's long speech and whistled, the older man shook his fist impatiently.

'But we want to buy it . . . pay for it . . . cash! Sixty roubles an acre.'

'And I wouldn't sell it for a hundred,' said Slimak.

'Perhaps we could come to terms, gospodarz.'

The peasant burst out laughing.

'Old man, have you lived so long in this world, and don't understand that I would not sell my land on any terms whatever?'

'You could buy thirty acres the other side of the Bug with what we should pay you.'

'If land is so cheap the other side of the Bug,

why don't you buy it yourself instead of coming here ? ' The son laughed.

' He is no fool, father ; he is telling you what I have been telling you from morning till night.'

The old man took Slimak's hand.

' Gospodarz,' he said, pressing it, ' let us talk like Christians and not like heathens. We praise the same God, why should we not agree ? You see, I have a son who is an expert miller, and I should like him to have a windmill on that hill. When he has a windmill he will grow steady and work and get married. Then I could be happy in my old age. That hill is nothing to you.'

' But it 's my land, no one has a right to it.'

' No one has a right to it, but I want to buy it.'

' Well, and I won't sell it ! '

The old man made a wry face, as if he were ready to cry. He drew the peasant a few steps aside, and said in a voice trembling with emotion : ' Why are you so hard on me, gospodarz ? You see, my sons don't hit it off with each other. The elder is a farmer, and I want to set up the younger as a miller and have him near me. I haven't long to live, I am eighty years old, don't quarrel with me.'

' Can't you buy land elsewhere ? '

' Not very well. We are a whole community settling together ; it would take a long time to make other arrangements. My son Wilhelm does not like farming, and unless I buy him a windmill he will starve or go away from me. I am an old man, sell me your land ! Listen,' he whispered, ' I will give you seventy-five roubles an acre. God is my witness, I am offering you more than the land is worth. But you will let me have it, won't you ? You are an honest man and a Christian.'

Slimak looked with astonishment and pity at the old man, from whose inflamed eyes the tears were pouring down.

'You can't have much sense, sir, to ask me such a thing,' he said. 'Would you ask a man to cut off his hand? What could a peasant do without his land?'

'You could buy twice as much. I will help you to find it.'

Slimak shook his head. 'You are talking as a man talks when he digs up a shrub in the woods. "Come," he says, "you shall be near my cottage!" The shrub comes because it must, but it soon dies.'

The man with the beard approached and spoke to his father in German.

'So you won't sell me your land?' said the old man.

'I won't.'

'Not for seventy-five roubles?'

'No.'

'And I tell you, you will sell it,' cried the younger man, drawing his father away. They went towards the bridge, talking German loudly.

The peasant rested his chin on his hand and looked after them; then his eyes fell on the manor-house, and he returned to the cottage at full speed. 'Jagna,' he cried, 'do you know that the squire has sold his estate?' The gospodyni crossed herself with a spoon.

'In the name of the Father . . . Are you mad, Josef? Who told you so?'

'Two Germans spoke to me just now; they told me. And, Jagna, they want to buy our land, our own land!'

'You are off your head altogether!' cried the

woman. 'Jendrek, go and see if there are any Germans about; your father is talking nonsense.'

Jendrek returned with the information that he had seen two men in blue overcoats the other side of the bridge.

Slimak sat on the bench, his head drooping, his hands resting limply on his knees. The morning light had turned grey, and made men and objects look dull. The gospodyni suddenly looked attentively at her husband.

'Why are you so pale?' she asked. 'What is the matter?'

'What is the matter? A nice question for a clever woman to ask! Don't you understand that the Germans will take the field away from us if the squire has sold it to them?'

'Why should they? We could pay the rent to them.'

The woman tried to talk confidently, but her voice was unsteady.

'You don't know what you're talking about! Germans keep cattle and are sharp after grazing land. Besides, they will want to get rid of me.'

'We shall see who gets rid of whom!' Slimakowa said sharply.

She came and stood in front of her husband, with her arms akimbo, gradually raising her voice.

'Lord, what a man! He has only just looked at the Swabian[1] vermin, and he has lost heart already. They will take away the field? Well, what of that? we will drive the cattle into it all the same.'

'They will shoot the cattle.'

'That isn't allowed.'

[1] The Polish peasants call all Germans 'Swabians'.

'Then they will go to law and worry the life out of me.'

'Very well, then we will buy fodder.'

'Where? The gospodarze won't sell us any, and we shan't get a blade from the Germans.'

The breakfast was boiling over, but the housewife paid no attention to it. She shook her clenched fists at her husband.

'What do you mean, Josef! Pull yourself together! This is bad, and that is no good! . . . What will you do then? You are taking the courage away from me, a woman, instead of making up your mind what to do. Aren't you ashamed before the children and Magda to sit there like a dying man, rolling your eyes? Do you think I shall let the children starve for the sake of your Germans, or do you think I shall get rid of the cow? Don't imagine that I shall allow you to sell your land! No fear! If I fall down dead and they bury me, I shall dig myself out again and prevent you from doing the children harm! Why are you sitting there, looking at me like a sheep? Eat your breakfast and go to the manor. Find out if the squire has really sold his land, and if he hasn't, fall at his feet, and lie there till he lets you have the field, even if you have to pay sixty roubles.'

'And if he has sold it?'

'If he has sold it, may God punish him!'

'That won't give us the field.'

'You are a fool!' she cried. 'We and the children and the cattle have lived by God's grace and not by the squire's.'

'That's so,' said Slimak, suddenly getting up. 'Give me my breakfast. What are you crying for?'

After her passionate outburst Slimakowa had actually broken down.

'How am I not to cry,' she sobbed, 'when the merciful God has punished me with such an idiot of a husband? He will do nothing himself and takes away my courage into the bargain.'

'Don't be a fool,' he said, with his face clouding. 'I'll go to the squire at once, even if I should have to give sixty roubles.'

'But if the field is sold?'

'Hang him, we have lived by the grace of God and not by his.'

'Then where will you get fodder?'

'Look after your pots and pans, and don't meddle with a man's affairs.'

'The Germans will drive you away.'

'The deuce they will!' He struck the table with his fist. 'If I were to fall down dead, if they chopped me into little pieces, I wouldn't let the dogs have my land. Give me my breakfast, or I'll ask you the reason why! . . . And you, Jendrek, be off with Maciek, or I shall get the strap!'

The sun shone into the ballroom of the manor-house through every chink and opening; streaks of white light lay on the floor, which was dented by the dancers' heels, and on the walls; the rays were reflected in the mirrors, rested on the gilt cornices and on the polished furniture. In comparison with them the light of the candles and lamps looked yellow and turbid. The ladies were pale and had blue circles round their eyes, the powder was falling from their dishevelled hair, their dresses were crumpled, and here and there in holes. The padding showed under the imitation

gold of the braids and belts of notables; rich velvets had turned into cheap velveteens, beaver fur to rabbit skins, and silver armour to tin. The musicians' hands dropped, the dancers' legs had grown stiff. Intoxication had cooled and given place to heaviness; lips were breathing feverishly. Only three couples were now turning in the middle of the room, then two, then none. There was a lack of arm-chairs for the men; the ladies hid their yawns behind their fans. At last the music ceased, and as no one said anything, a dead silence spread through the room. Candles began to splutter and went out, lamps smoked.

'Shall we go in to tea?' asked the squire, in a hoarse voice.

'To bed . . . to bed,' whispered the guests.

'The bedrooms are ready,' he said, trying to sound cheerful, in spite of sleepiness and a cold.

The ladies immediately got up, threw their wraps over their shoulders and left the room, turning their faces away from the windows.

Soon the ballroom was empty, save for the old cellist, who had gone to sleep with his arms round his instrument. The bustle was transferred to distant rooms; there was much stamping upstairs and noise of men's voices in the courtyard. Then all became silent.

The squire came clinking along the passages, looked dully round the ballroom, and said, yawning: 'Put out the lights, Mateus, and open the windows. Where is my lady?'

'My lady has gone to her room.'

My lady, in her orange-velvet gipsy costume and a diamond hoop in her hair, was lying in

an arm-chair, her head thrown back. The squire dropped into another arm-chair, yawning broadly.

'Well, it was a great success.'

'Splendid,' yawned my lady.

'Our guests ought to be satisfied.' After a while he spoke again.

'Do you know that I have sold the estate?'

'To whom?'

'To Hirschgold; he is giving me seventy-five roubles an acre.'

'Thank God we shall get away at last.'

'Well, you might come and give me a kiss!'

'I'm much too tired. Come here, if you want one.'

'I deserve that you should come here. I've done exceedingly well.'

'No, I won't. Hirschgold . . . Hirschgold . . . oh yes, some acquaintance of father's. The first mazurka was splendid, wasn't it?'

The squire was snoring.

CHAPTER VII

The squire and his wife left for Warsaw a week after the ball. Their place was taken by Hirschgold's agent, a freckle-faced Jew, who installed himself in a small room in the bailiff's house, spent his days in looking through and sending out accounts, and bolted the door and slept with two revolvers under his pillow at night.

The squire had taken part of the furniture with him, the rest of the suites and fixtures were sold to the neighbouring gentry; the Jews bought up the library by the pound, the priest acquired the American organ, the garden-seats passed into

Gryb's ownership, and for three roubles the peasant Orzchewski became possessed of the large engraving of Leda and the Swan, to which the purchaser and his family said their prayers. The inlaid floors henceforward decorated the magisterial court, and the damask hangings were bought by the tailors and made into bodices for the village girls.

When Slimak went a few weeks later to have a look at the manor-house he could not believe his eyes at the sight of the destruction that had taken place. There were no panes in the windows and not a single latch left on the wide-open doors; the walls had been stripped and the floors taken up. The drawing-room was a dungheap, Pani Joselawa, the innkeeper's wife, had put up hencoops there and in the adjoining rooms; axes and saws were lying about everywhere. The farmhands, who according to agreement were kept on till midsummer, strolled idly from corner to corner; one of the teamdrivers had taken desperately to drink; the housekeeper was ill with fever, and the pantry-boy, as well as one of the farm-boys, were in prison for stealing latches off the doors.

'Good God!' said the peasant.

He was seized with fear at the thought of the unknown power which had ruined the ancient manor-house in a moment. An invisible cloud seemed to be hanging over the valley and the village; the first flash of lightning had struck and completely shattered the seat of its owners.

Some days later the neighbourhood began to swarm with strangers, woodcutters and sawyers, mostly Germans. They walked and drove in crowds along the road past Slimak's cottage; sometimes they marched in detachments like

soldiers. They were quartered at the manor, where they turned out the servants and the remaining cattle: they occupied every corner. At night they lit great fires in the courtyard, and in the morning they all walked off to the woods. At first it was difficult to guess what they were doing. Soon, however, there was a distant echo as of someone drumming with his fingers on the table; at last the sound of the axe and the thud of falling trees was heard quite plainly. Fresh inroads on the wavy contour of the forest appeared continually; first crevices, then windows, then wide openings, and for the first time since the world was the world, the astonished sky looked into the valley from that side.

The wood fell: only the sky remained and the earth with a few juniper bushes and countless rows of tree-trunks, hastily stripped of their branches. The rapacious axe had not spared one of the leafy tribe. Not one—not even the centenarian oak which had been touched by lightning more than once. Gazing upwards, this defier of storms had hardly noticed the worms turning round its feet, and the blows of their axes meant no more to it than the tapping of the woodpecker. It fell suddenly, convinced at the last that the world was insecure after all, and not worth living in.

There was another oak, half withered, on the branches of which the unfortunate Simon Golamb[1] had hanged himself; the people passed it in fear.

'Flee!' it murmured, when the woodcutters approached. 'I bring you death; only one man dared to touch my branches, and he died.' But

[1] Polish spelling: *Gołąb.*

the woodcutters paid no heed, deeper and deeper they sent the sharp axe into its heart, and with a roar it swayed and fell.

The night-wind moaned over the corpses of the strong trees, and the birds and wild creatures, deprived of their native habitations, mourned.

Older still than the oaks were the huge boulders thickly sown over the fields. The peasants had never touched them; they were too heavy to be removed; moreover, there was a superstition that the rebellious devils had in the first days of the creation thrown these stones at the angels, and that it was unlucky to touch them. Overgrown with moss they each lay in an island of green grass; the shepherds lit their fires beneath them on chilly nights, the ploughmen lay down in their shade on a hot afternoon, the hawker would sometimes hide his treasures underneath them.

Now their last hour had struck too; men began to busy themselves about them. At first the village people thought that the 'Swabians' were looking for treasure; but Jendrek found out that they were boring holes in the venerable stones.

'What are the idiots doing that for?' asked Slimakowa. 'Blessed if I know what 's the good of that to them!'

'I know, neighbour,' said old Sobieska, blinking her eyes; 'they are boring because they have heard that there are toads inside those big stones.'

'And what if there are?'

'You see, they want to know if it 's true.'

'But what 's that to them?'

'I'll be hanged if I know!' retorted Sobieska in such a decided tone that Slimakowa considered the matter as settled.

The Germans, however, were not looking for toads. Before long such a cannonading began that the echoes reached the farthest ends of the valley, telling every one that not even the rocks were able to withstand the Germans.

'Those Swabians are a hard race,' muttered Slimak, as he gazed on the giants that had been dashed to pieces. He thought of the colonists for whom the property had been bought, and who now wanted his land as well.

'They are not anywhere about,' he thought; 'perhaps they won't come after all.'

But they came.

One morning, early in April, Slimak went out before sunrise as usual to say his prayers in the open. The east was flushed with pink, the stars were paling, only the morning star shone like a jewel, and was welcomed from below by the awakening birds.

The peasant's lips moved in prayer, while he fixed his eyes on the white mist which covered the ground like snow. Then it was that he heard a distant sound from beyond the hills, a rumble of carts and the voices of many people. He quickly walked up the lonely pine hill and perceived a long procession of carts covered with awnings, filled with human beings and their domestic and agricultural implements. Men in navy-blue coats and straw hats were walking beside them, cows were tied behind, and small herds of pigs were scrambling in and out of the procession. A little cart, scarcely larger than a child's, brought up the rear; it was drawn by a dog and a woman, and conveyed a man whose feet were dangling down in front.

'The Swabians are coming!' flashed through

Slimak's mind, but he put the thought away from him.

'Maybe they are gipsies,' he argued. But no—they were not dressed like gipsies, and woodcutters don't take cattle about with them—then who were they?

He shrank from the thought that the colonists were actually coming.

'Maybe it 's they, maybe not . . .' he whispered.

For a moment a hill concealed them from his view, and he hoped that the vision had dissolved into the light of day. But there they were again, and each step of their lean horses brought them nearer. The sun was gilding the hill which they were ascending, and the larks were singing brightly to welcome them.

Across the valley the church bell was ringing. Was it calling to prayers as usual, or did it warn the people of the invasion of a foreign power?

Slimak looked towards the village. The cottage-doors were closed, no one was astir, and even if he had shouted aloud, 'Look, gospodarze, the Germans are here!' no one would have been alarmed.

The string of noisy people now began to file past Slimak's cottage. The tired horses were walking slowly, the cows could scarcely lift their feet, the pigs squeaked and stumbled. But the people were happy, laughing and shouting from cart to cart. They turned round by the bridge on to the open ground.

The small cart in the rear had now reached Slimak's gate; the big dog fell down panting, the man raised himself to a sitting position and the girl took the strap from her shoulder and wiped her perspiring forehead.

Slimak was seized with pity for them; he came down from the hill and approached the travellers.

'Where do you all come from? Who are you?' he asked.

'We are colonists from beyond the Vistula,' the girl answered. 'Our people have bought land here, and we have come with them.'

'But have not you bought land also?'

The woman shrugged her shoulders.

'Is it the custom with you for the women to drag the men about?'

'What can we do? we have no horses and my father cannot walk on his own feet.'

'Is your father lame?'

'Yes.'

The peasant reflected for a moment.

'Then he is hanging on to the others, as it were?'

'Oh no,' replied the girl with much spirit, 'father teaches the children and I take in sewing, and when there is no sewing to do I work in the fields.'

Slimak looked at her with surprise and said, after a pause: 'You can't be German, you talk our language very well.'

'We are from Germany.'

'Yes, we are Germans,' said the man in the cart, speaking for the first time.

Slimakowa and Jendrek now came out of the cottage and joined the group at the gate.

'What a strong dog!' cried Jendrek.

'Look here,' said Slimak, 'this lady has dragged her lame father a long way in the cart; would you do that, you scamp?'

'Why should I? Haven't they any horses, dad?'

'We have had horses,' murmured the man in the cart, 'but we haven't any now.'

He was pale and thin, with red hair and beard.

'Wouldn't you like to rest and have something to eat after your long journey?' inquired Slimak.

'I don't want anything to eat, but my father would like some milk.'

'Run and get some milk, Jendrek,' cried Slimak.

'Meaning no offence,' said Slimakowa, 'but you Germans can't have a country of your own, or else you wouldn't come here.'

'This is our home,' the girl replied. 'I was born in this country, the other side of the Vistula.'

Her father made an impatient movement and said in a broken voice: 'We Germans have a country of our own, larger than yours, but it 's not pleasant to live in: too many people, too little land; it 's difficult to make a living, and we have to pay heavy taxes and do hard military service, and there are penalties for everything.'

He coughed and continued after a pause: 'Everybody wants to be comfortable and live as he pleases, and not as others tell him. It 's not pleasant to live in our country, so we've come here.'

Jendrek brought the milk and offered it to the girl, who gave it to her father.

'God repay you!' sighed the invalid; 'the people in this country are kind.'

'I wish you would not do us harm,' said Slimakowa in a half-whisper.

'Why should we do you harm?' said the man. 'Do we take your land? do we steal? do we murder you? We are quiet people, we get in nobody's way so long as nobody gets . . .'

'You have bought the land here,' Slimak interrupted.

'But why did your squire sell it to us? If thirty peasants had been settled here instead of one man, who did nothing but squander his money, our people would not have come. Why did not you yourselves form a community and buy the village? Your money would have been as good as ours. You have been settled here for ages, but the colonists had to come in before you troubled about the land, and then no sooner have they bought it than they become a stumbling-block to you! Why wasn't the squire a stumbling-block to you?'

Breathless, he paused and looked at his wasted arms, then continued: 'To whom is it that the colonists resell their land? To you peasants! On the other side of the Vistula[1] the peasants bought up every scrap of our land.'

'One of your lot is always after me to sell him my land,' said Slimak.

'To think of such a thing!' interposed his wife.

'Who is he?'

'How should I know? there are two of them, and they came twice, an old man and one with a beard. They want my hill to put up a windmill, they say.'

'That 's Hamer,' said the girl under her breath to her father.

'Oh, Hamer,' repeated the invalid, 'he has

[1] i. e. in Prussian Poland. One of the Polish people's grievances is that the large properties are not sold direct to them but to the colonists, and the peasants have to buy the land from them. Statistics show that in spite of the great activity of the German Colonization Commission more and more land is constantly acquired by the Polish peasants, who hold on to the land tenaciously.

caused us difficulties enough. Our people wanted to go to the other side of the Bug, where land only costs thirty roubles an acre, but he persuaded them to come here, because they are building a railway across the valley. So our people have been buying land here at seventy roubles an acre and have been running into debt with the Jew, and we shall see what comes of it.'

The girl meanwhile had been eating coarse bread, sharing it with the dog. She now looked across to where the colonists were spreading themselves over the fields.

'We must go, father,' she said.

'Yes, we must go; what do I owe you for the milk, gospodarz?'

The peasant shrugged his shoulders.

'If we were obliged to take money for a little thing like that, I shouldn't have asked you.'

'Well, God repay you!'

'God speed you,' said Slimak and his wife.

'Strange folk, those Germans,' he said, when they had slowly moved off. 'He is a clever man, yet he goes about in that little cart like an old beggar.'

'And the girl!' said Slimakowa, 'whoever heard of dragging an old man about, as if you were a horse.'

'They're not bad,' said Slimak, returning to his cottage.

The conversation with the Germans had reassured him that they were not as terrible as he had fancied.

When Maciek went out after breakfast to plough the potato-fields, Slimak slipped off.

'You've got to put up the fence!' his wife called out after him.

'That won't run away,' he answered, and banged the door, fearful lest his wife should detain him.

He crouched as he ran through the yard, wishing to attract her attention as little as possible, and went stealthily up the hill to where Maciek was perspiring over his ploughing.

'How about those Swabians?' asked the labourer.

Slimak sat down on the slope so that he could not be seen from the cottage, and pulled out his pipe.

'You might sit over there,' Maciek said, pointing with his whip to a raised place; 'then I could smell the smoke.'

'What 's the good of the smoke to you? I'll give you my pipe to finish, and meanwhile it does not grieve the old woman to see me sitting here wasting my time.' He lit his pipe very deliberately, rested his elbows on his knees and his head in his hands and looked into the valley, watching the crowd of Germans.

With their covered carts they had enclosed a square into which they had driven their cattle and horses; inside and outside of this the people were bustling about. Some put a portable manger on a stand and fed the cows, others ran to the river with buckets. The women brought out their saucepans and little sacks of vegetables and a crowd of children ran down the ravine for fuel.

'What crowds of children they have!' said Slimak; 'we have not as many in the whole village.'

'Thick as lice,' said Maciek.

Slimak could not wonder enough. Yesterday the field had been empty and quiet, to-day it was

like a fair. People by the river, people in the ravines, people on the fields, who chop the bushes, carry wood, make fires, feed and water the animals! One man had already opened a retail-shop on a cart and was obviously doing good business. The women were pressing round him, buying salt, sugar, vinegar. Some young mothers had made cradles of shawls, suspended on short pitchforks, and while they were cooking with one hand they rocked the cradle with the other. There was a veterinary surgeon, too, who examined the foot of a lame horse, and a barber was shaving an old Swabian on the step of his cart.

'Do you notice how quickly they work? It 's farther for them to fetch the firewood than for us, yet we take half the day over it and they do it before you can say two prayers.'

'Oh! oh!' said Maciek, who seemed to feel this remark as an aspersion.

'But, then, they work together,' continued Slimak; 'when our people go out in a crowd every one attends to his own business, and rests when he likes or gets into the way of the others. But these dogs work together as if they were used to each other; if one of them were to lie down on the ground the others would cram work into his hand and stand over him till he had finished it. Watch them yourself.'

He gave his pipe to Maciek and returned to the cottage.

'They are quick folk, those Swabians,' he muttered, 'and clever!' Within half an hour he had discovered the two secrets of modern work: organization and speed.

About noon two colonists came to the gospo-

darstwo and asked Slimak to sell them butter and potatoes and hay. He let them have the former without bargaining, but he refused the hay.

'Let us at least have a cartload of straw,' they asked with their foreign accent.

'I won't. I haven't got any.'

The men got angry.

'That scoundrel Hamer is giving us no end of trouble,' one cried, dashing his cap on the ground; 'he told us we should get fodder and everything at the farms. We can't get any at the manor either; the Jews from the inn are there and won't stir from the place.'

Just as they were leaving, a brichka drove up containing the two Hamers, whose faces were now quite familiar to Slimak. The colonists rushed to the vehicle with shouts and explanations, gesticulating wildly, pointing hither and thither, and talking in turns, for even in their excitement they seemed to preserve system and order.

The Hamers remained perfectly calm, listening patiently and attentively, until the others were tired of shouting. When they had finished, the younger man answered them at some length, and at last they shook hands and the colonists took up their sacks of potatoes and departed cheerfully.

'How are you, gospodarz?' called the elder man to Slimak. 'Shall we come to terms yet?'

'What 's the use of talking, father?' said the other; 'he will come to us of his own accord!'

'Never!' cried Slimak, and added under his breath: 'They are dead set on me—the vermin! Queer folk!' he observed to his wife, looking after the departing brichka, 'when our people are quarrelling, they don't stop to listen, but these

seem to understand each other all the same and to smooth things over.'

'What are you always cracking up the Swabians for, you old silly?' returned his wife. 'You don't seem to remember that they want to take your land away from you. . . . I can't make you out!'

'What can they do to me? I won't let them have it, and they can't rob me.'

'Who knows? They are many, and you are only one.'

'That 's God's will! I can see they have more sense than I have, but when it comes to holding on, there I can match them! Look at all the woodpeckers on that little tree; that tree is like us peasants. The squire sits and hammers, the parish sits and hammers, the Jews and the Germans sit and hammer, yet in the end they all fly away and the tree is still the tree.'

The evening brought a visit from old Sobieska, who stumbled in with her demand of a 'thimbleful of whisky'.

'I nearly gave up the ghost,' she cried, 'I've run so fast to tell you the news.'

She was rewarded with a thimble which a giant could well have worn on his finger.

'Oh, Lord!' she cried, when she had drained it, 'this is the judgement day for some people in the village! You see, Gryb and Orzchewski had always taken for granted that the colonists wouldn't come, and they had meant to drive a little bargain between them and keep some of the best land and settle Jasiek Gryb on it like a nobleman, and he was to marry Orzchewski's Paulinka. You know, she had learnt embroidery from the squire's wife, and Jasiek had been doing work in the bailiff's

office and now goes about in an overcoat on high-days and holidays and . . . give me another thimbleful, or I shall feel faint and can't talk. . . . Meanwhile, as I told you, the colonists had paid down half the money to the Jew, and here they are, that 's certain! When Gryb hears of it, he comes and abuses Josel! "You cur of a Jew, you Caiaphas, you have crucified Christ and now you are cheating me! You told me the Germans wouldn't pay up, and here they are!" Whereupon Josel says: "We don't know yet whether they will stay!" At first Gryb wouldn't listen and shouted and banged his fists on the table, but at last Josel drew him off to his room with Orzchewski, and they made some arrangement among themselves.'

'He 's a fool,' said Slimak; 'he wasn't cute enough to buy the land, he won't be able to cope with the Germans.'

'Not cute enough?' cried the old woman. 'Give me a thimbleful. . . . Josel 's clever enough, anyway . . . and his brother-in-law is even better . . . they'll deal with the Swabians . . . I know what I know . . . give me a thimbleful . . . give me a thim . . .' She became incoherent.

'What was that she was saying?' asked Slimakowa.

'The usual things she says when she 's tipsy. She is in service with Josel, so she thinks him almighty.'

When night came, Slimak again went to look at the camp. The people had retired under their awnings, the cattle were lying down inside the square, only the horses were grazing in the fields and ravines. At times a flame from the camp fires flared up, or a horse neighed; from hour to hour the call of a sleepy watchman was heard.

Slimak returned and threw himself on his bed, but could find no rest. The darkness deprived him of energy, and he thought with fear of the Germans who were so many and he but one. Might they not attack him or set his house on fire ?

About midnight a shot rang out, followed by another. He ran into the back-yard and came upon the equally frightened Maciek. Shouts, curses, and the clatter of horses' hoofs came from beyond the river. Gradually the noise subsided.

Slimak learned in the morning from the colonists that horse-thieves had stolen in among the horses.

The peasant was taken aback. Never before had such a thing happened in the neighbourhood.

The news of the attack spread like wildfire and was improved upon in every village. It was said that there was a gang of horse-stealers about, who removed the horses to Prussia ; that the Germans had fought with them all night, and that some had been killed.

At last these rumours reached the ears of the police-sergeant, who harnessed his fat mare, put a small cask and some empty bags into his cart, and drove off in pursuit of the thieves.

The Germans treated him to smoked ham and excellent brandy, and Fritz Hamer explained that they suspected two discharged manor-servants, Kuba Sukiennik and Jasiek Rogacz, of stealing the horses.

'They have been arrested before for stealing locks off the doors, but had to be released because there were no witnesses,' said the sergeant. 'Which of the gentlemen shot at them ? Has he a licence to carry firearms ?'

Hamer, seeing that the question was becoming

ticklish, led him aside and explained things so satisfactorily to him that he soon drove off, recommending that watch should be kept, and that the colonists should not carry firearms.

'I suppose your farm will soon be standing, sir?' he asked.

'In a month's time,' replied Hamer.

'Capital! . . . we must make a day of it!'

He drove on to the manor-house, where Hirschgold's agent was so delighted to see him that he brought out a bottle of Crimean wine. On the topic of thieves, however, he had no explanation to offer.

'When I heard them shooting I at once snatched up my revolvers, one in each hand, and I didn't close my eyes all night.'

'And have you a licence to carry firearms?'

'Why shouldn't I?'

'For two?'

'Oh well, the second is broken; I only keep it for show.'

'How many workmen do you employ?'

'About a hundred.'

'Are all their passports in order?'

The agent gave him a most satisfactory account as to this in his own way and the sergeant took leave.

'Be careful, sir,' he recommended, 'once robbery begins in the village it will be difficult to stop it. And in case of accident you will do well to let me know first before you do anything.' He said this so impressively that the agent henceforward took the two Jews from the manor-house to sleep in the bailiff's cottage.

Slimak's gospodarstwo was the sergeant's next

destination. Slimakowa was just pouring out the peeled-barley soup when the stout administrator of the law entered.

'The Lord be praised,' he said. 'What news?'

'In Eternity. We are all right.'

The sergeant looked round.

'Is your husband at home?'

'Where else should he be? Fetch your father, Jendrek.'

'Beautiful barley; is it your own?'

'Of course it is.'

'You might give me a sackful. I'll pay you next time I come.'

'I'll get the bag at once, sir.'

'Perhaps you can sell me a chicken as well?'

'We can.'

'Mind it 's tender, and put it under the box.'

Slimak came in. 'Have you heard, gospodarz, who it was that tried to steal the horses?'

'How should I know?'

'They say in the village that it was Sukiennik and Rogacz.'

'I don't know about that. I have heard they cannot find work here, because they have been in prison.'

'Have you got any vodka? The dust makes one's throat dry.'

Vodka and bread and cheese were brought.

'You'd better be careful,' he said, when he departed, 'for they will either rob you or suspect you.'

'By God's grace no one has ever robbed me, and it will never happen.'

The sergeant went to Josel, who received him enthusiastically. He invited him into the parlour

and assured him that all his licences were in order.

'There is no signboard at the gate.'

'I'll put one up at once of whatever kind you like,' said the innkeeper obsequiously, and ordered a bottle of porter.

The sergeant now opened the question of the night-attack.

'What night-attack?' jeered Josel. 'The Germans shot at one another and then got frightened and made out that there was a gang of robbers about. Such things don't happen here.'

The sergeant wiped his moustache. 'All the same Sukiennik and Rogacz have been after the horses.'

Josel made a wry face. 'How could they, when they were in my house that night.'

'In your house?'

'To be sure,' Josel answered carelessly. 'Gryb and Orzchewski both saw them . . . dead drunk they were. What are they to do? they can't get regular work, and what a man perchance earns in a day he likes to drink away at night.'

'They might have got out.'

'They might, but the stable was locked and the key with the foreman.' The conversation passed on to other topics.

'Look after Sukiennik and Rogacz,' the sergeant said, on his departure, when he and his mare had been sufficiently rested.

'Am I their father, or are they in my service?'

'They might rob you.'

'Oh! I'll see to that all right!'

The sergeant returned home, half asleep, half

awake. Sukiennik and Rogacz kept passing before his vision; they had their hands full of locks and were surrounded by horses. Josel's smiling face was hovering over them and now and then old Gryb and his son Jasiek jeered from behind a cloud. He sat up . . . startled. But there was nothing near him except the white hen under the box and the trees by the wayside. He spat.

'Bah . . . dreams!' he muttered.

The peasants were relieved when day after day passed and there was no sign of building in the camp. They jumped to the conclusion that either the Germans had not been able to come to terms with Hirschgold, or had quarrelled with the Hamers, or that they had lost heart because of the horse-thieves.

'Why, they haven't so much as measured out the ground!' cried Orzchewski, and washed down the remark with a huge glass of beer.

He had, however, not yet wiped his mouth when a cart pulled up at the inn and the surveyor alighted. They knew him directly by his moustaches, which were trimmed to the resemblance of eels, and by his sloeberry-coloured nose.

While Gryb and Orzchewski sorrowfully conducted each other home, they comforted themselves with the thought that the surveyor might only be spending the night in the village on his way elsewhere.

'God grant it, I want to see that young scamp of a Jasiek settled and married, and if I let him out of my sight he goes to the dogs directly.'

'My Paulinka is a match for him; she'll look after him!'

'You don't know what you're talking of,

neighbour; it will take the three of us to look after him. Lately he hasn't spent a single night at home, and sometimes I don't see him for a week.'

The surveyor started work in the manor-fields the next morning, and for several days was seen walking about with a crowd of Germans in attendance on all his orders, carrying his poles, putting up a portable table, providing him with an umbrella or a place in the shade where he could take long pulls out of his wicker flask. The peasants stood silently watching them.

'I could measure as well as that if I drank as much as he does,' said one of them.

'Ah, but that is why he is a surveyor,' said another, 'because he has a strong head.'

No sooner had he departed than the Germans drove off and returned with heavy cartloads of building materials. One fine day a small troop of masons and carpenters appeared with their implements. A party of colonists went out to meet them, followed by a large crowd of women and children. They met at an appointed place, where refreshments and a barrel of beer had been provided.

Old Hamer, in a faded drill-jacket, Fritz in a black coat, and Wilhelm, adorned with a scarlet waistcoat with red flowers, were busy welcoming the guests; Wilhelm had charge of the barrel of beer.

Maciek had noticed these preparations and gave the alarm, and all the inhabitants of the gospodarstwo watched the proceedings with the keenest interest. They saw old Hamer taking up a stake and driving it into the ground with a wooden hammer.

'Hoch! . . . Hoch!' shouted the workmen. Hamer bowed, took a second stake and carried it northwards, accompanied by the crowd. The women and children were headed by the schoolmaster in his little cart. He now lifted his cap high into the air, and at this sign the whole crowd started to sing Luther's hymn :

'A stronghold sure our God remains,
A shield and hope unfailing,
In need His help our freedom gains,
O'er all our fear prevailing ;
Our old malignant foe
Would fain work us woe ;
With craft and great might
He doth against us fight,
On earth is no one like him.'

At the first note Slimak had taken off his cap, his wife crossed herself, and Maciek stepped aside and knelt down. Stasiek, with wide-open eyes, began to tremble, and Jendrek started running down the hill, waded through the river, and headed at full speed for the camp.

While Hamer was driving the stake into the ground the procession, slowly coming up to him, continued :

'Our utmost might is all in vain,
We straight had been rejected,
But for us fights the perfect Man
By God Himself elected ;
Ye ask : Who may He be ?
The Lord Christ is He !
The God, by hosts ador'd,
Our great Incarnate Lord,
Who all His foes will vanquish.'

Never had the peasants heard a hymn like this, so solemn, yet so triumphant, they who only knew their plainsongs, which rose to heaven like a great

groan: 'Lord, we lay our guilt before Thine eyes.'

A cry from Stasiek roused the parents from their reverie.

'Mother . . . mother . . . they are singing!' stammered the child; his lips became blue, and he fell to the ground.

The frightened parents lifted him up and carried him into the cottage, where he recovered when the singing ceased. They had always known that the singing at church affected him very deeply, but they had never seen him like this.

Jendrek, meanwhile, although wet through and cold, stood riveted by the spectacle he was watching. Why were these people walking and singing like this? Surely, they wanted to drive away some evil power from their future dwellings, and, not having incense or blessed chalk, they were using stakes. Well, after all, a club of oakwood was better against the devil than chalk! Or were they themselves bewitching the place?

He was struck with the difference in the behaviour of the Germans. The old men, women, and children were walking along solemnly, singing, but the young fellows and the workmen stood in groups, smoking and laughing. Once they made a noisy interruption when Wilhelm Hamer, who presided at the beer-barrel, lifted up his glass. The young men shouted 'Hoch! hurrah!' Old Hamer looked round disapprovingly, and the schoolmaster shook his fist.

As the procession drew near, Jendrek heard a woman's voice above the children's shrill trebles, Hamer's guttural bass and the old people's nasal tones; it was clear, full, and inexpressively

moving. It made his heart tremble within him. The sounds shaped themselves in his imagination to the picture of a beautiful weeping-willow.

He knew that it must be the voice of the schoolmaster's daughter, whom he had seen before. At that time the dog had engaged his attention more than the girl, but now her voice took entire possession of the boy's soul, to the exclusion of everything else he heard or saw. He, too, wanted to sing, and began under his breath:

> 'The Lord is ris'n to-day,
> The Lord Jesus Christ . . .'

It seemed to fit in with the melody which the Germans were just singing.

He was roused from this state by the young men's voices; he caught sight of the schoolmaster's daughter and unconsciously moved towards her. But the young men soon brought him to his senses. They pulled his hat over his ears, pushed him into the middle of the crowd, and, wet, smeared with sand, looking more like a scarecrow than a boy, he was passed from hand to hand like a ball. Suddenly his eyes met those of the girl, and a wild spirit awoke in him. He kicked one young man over with his bare legs, tore the shirt off another one's back, butted old Hamer in the stomach, and then stood with clenched fists in the space he had cleared, looking where he might break through. Most of the men laughed at him, but some were for handling him roughly. Fortunately old Hamer recognized him.

'Why, youngster, what are you up to?'

'They're bullying me,' he said, while the tears were rising in his throat.

'Don't you come from that cottage? What are you doing here?'

'I wanted to listen to your singing, but those scoundrels . . .'

He stopped suddenly when he saw the grey eyes of the schoolmaster's daughter fixed on him. She offered him the glass of beer she had been drinking from.

'You are wet through,' she said. 'Take a good pull.'

'I don't want it,' said the boy, and felt ashamed directly; it did not seem well-mannered to speak rudely to one so beautiful.

'I might get tipsy . . .' he cried, but drained the glass, looked at her again and blushed so deeply that the girl smiled sadly as she looked at him.

At that moment violins and cellos struck up; Wilhelm Hamer came heavily bounding along and took the girl away to dance. Her yearning eyes once more rested on Jendrek's face.

He felt that something strange was happening to him. A terrible anger and sorrow gripped him by the throat; he wanted to throw himself on Wilhelm and tear his flowered waistcoat off his back; at the same time he wanted to cry aloud. Suddenly he turned to go.

'Are you going?' asked the schoolmaster. 'Give my compliments to your father.'

'And you can tell him from me that I have rented the field by the river from Midsummer Day,' Hamer called after him.

'But dad rented it from the squire!'

Hamer laughed . . . 'The squire! We are the squires now, and the field is mine.'

As Jendrek neared the road he came upon a peasant, hidden behind a bush, who had been watching. It was Gryb.

'Be praised,' said Jendrek.

'Who 's praised at your place?' growled the old man; 'it must be the devil and not the Lord, since you are taking up with the Germans.'

'Who's taking up with them?'

The peasant's eyes flashed and his dry skin quivered.

'You're taking up with them!' he cried, shaking his fist, 'or perhaps I didn't see you running off to them like a dog through the water to cadge for a glass of beer, nor your father and mother on the hill praying with the Swabians . . . praying to the devil! God has punished them already, for something has fallen on Stasiek. There will be more to come . . . you wait!'

Jendrek slowly walked home, puzzled and sad. When he returned to the cottage, he found Stasiek lying ill. He told his father what Gryb had said.

'He 's an old fool,' replied Slimak. 'What! should a man stand like a beast when others are praying, even if they are Swabians?'

'But their praying has bewitched Stasiek.' Slimak looked gloomy.

'Why should it have been their prayers? Stasiek is easily upset. Let a woman but sing in the fields and he'll begin to shake all over.'

The matter ended there. Jendrek tried to busy himself about the cottage, but he felt stifled indoors. He roamed about in the ravines, stood on the hill and watched the Germans, or forced his way through brambles. Wherever he went, the image of the schoolmaster's daughter went with

him; he saw her tanned face, grey eyes, and graceful movements. Sometimes her powerful, entrancing voice seemed to come to him as from a depth.

'Has she cast a spell over me?' he whispered, frightened, and continued to think of her.

CHAPTER VIII

Slimak had never been so well off as he was that spring; money was flowing into his chest while he took his leisure and looked around him at all the new things.

Formerly, after a heavy day, he had thrown himself on his bed and had scarcely fallen asleep like a stone when his wife would pull the cover off him, crying: 'Get up, Josef; it is morning.'

'How can it be morning?' he thought; 'I've only just lain down.' All the same he had to gather his bones together, when each one individually held to the bed; willy-nilly he had to get up. So hard was the resolution sometimes, that he even thought with pleasure of the eternal sleep, when his wife would no longer stand over him and urge: 'Get up, wash . . . you'll be late; they'll take it off your wages.'

Then he would dress, and drag the equally tired horses out of the stable, so overcome with sleep that he would pause on the threshold and mutter, 'I shall stay at home!' But he was afraid of his wife, and he also knew very well that he could not make both ends meet at the gospodarstwo without his wages.

Now all that was different. He slept as long as he liked. Sometimes his wife pulled him by the leg from habit and said: 'Get up, Josef.' But, opening only one eye, lest sleep should run away from him, he would growl: 'Leave me alone!' and sleep, maybe, till the church bell rang for Mass at seven o'clock.

There was really nothing to get up for now. Maciek had long ago finished the spring-work in the fields; the Jews had left the village, carrying their business farther afield, following the new railway line now under construction, and no one sent for him from the manor—for there was no manor. He smoked, strolled about for days together in the yard, or looked at the abundantly sprouting corn. His favourite pastime, however, was to watch the Germans, whose habitations were shooting up like mushrooms.

By the end of May Hamer and two or three others had finished building, and their gospodarstwos were pleasant to look at. They resembled each other like drops of water; each one stood in the middle of its fields, the garden was by the roadside, shut off by a wooden fence; the house, roughcast, consisted of four large rooms, and behind it was a good-sized square of farm-buildings.

All the buildings were larger and loftier than those of the Polish peasants, and were clean and comfortable, although they looked stiff and severe; for while the roofs of the Polish gospodarstwos overhung on the four sides, those of the Germans did so only at the front and back.

But they had large windows, divided into six squares, and the doors were made by the carpenter. Jendrek, who daily ran over to the settlement

reported that there were wooden floors, and that the kitchen was a separate room with an iron-plated stove.

Slimak sometimes dreamt that he would build a place like that, only with a different roof. Then he would jump up, because he felt he ought to go somewhere and do work, for he was bored and ashamed of idling; at times he would long for the manor-fields over which he had guided the plough, where the settlement now stood. Then a great fear would seize him that he would be powerless when the Germans, who had felled forests, shattered rocks and driven away the squire, should start on him in earnest.

But he always reassured himself. He had been neighbours with them now for two months and they had done him no harm. They worked quietly, minded their cattle so that they should not stray, and even their children were not troublesome, but went to school at Hamer's house, where the infirm schoolmaster kept them in order.

'They are respectable people,' he satisfied himself. 'I'm better off with them than with the squire.'

He was, for they bought from him and paid well. In less than a month he had taken a hundred roubles from them; at the manor this had meant a whole year's toil.

'Do you think, Josef, that the Germans will always go on buying from you?' his wife asked from time to time. 'They have their own gospodarstwos now, and better ones than yours; you will see, it will last through the summer at the best, and after that they won't buy a stick from us.'

'We shall see,' said the peasant.

He was secretly counting on the advantages which he would reap from the building of the new line; had not the engineer promised him this? He even laid in provisions with this object, having to go farther afield, for the peasants in the village would no longer sell him anything.

But he soon realized that prices had risen; the Germans had long ago scoured the neighbourhood and bought without bargaining.

Once he met Josel who, instead of smiling maliciously at him as usual, asked him to enter into a business transaction with him.

'What sort of business?' asked Slimak.

'Build a cottage on your land for my brother-in-law.'

'What for?'

'He wants to set up a shop and deal with the railway people, else the Germans will take away all the business from under our noses.'

Slimak reflected.

'No, I don't want a Jew on my land,' he said. 'I shouldn't be the first to be eaten up by you longcurls.'

'You don't want to live with a Jew, but you are not afraid to pray with the Germans,' said the Jew, pale with anger.

Slimak was made to feel the profound unpopularity he had incurred in the village. At church on Sundays hardly anyone answered him 'In Eternity', and when he passed a group he would hear loud talk of heresy, and God's judgement which would follow.

He therefore ordered a Mass one Sunday, on the advice of his wife, and went to confession with her and Jendrek; but this did not improve matters,

for the villagers discussed over their beer in the evening what deadly sin he might have been guilty of to go to confession and pray so fervently.

Even old Sobieska rarely appeared and came furtively to ask for her vodka. Once, when her tongue was loosened, she said: 'They say you have turned into a Lutheran. . . . It 's true,' she added, 'there is only one merciful God, still, the Germans are a filthy thing!'

The Germans now began mysteriously to disappear with their carts at dawn of day, carrying large quantities of provisions with them. Slimak investigated this matter, getting up early himself. Soon he saw a tiny yellow speck in the direction which they had taken. It grew larger towards evening, and he became convinced that it was the approaching railway line.

'The scoundrels!' he said to his wife, 'they've been keeping this secret so as to steal a march on me, but I shall drive over.'

'Well, look sharp!' cried his wife; 'those railway people were to have been our best customers.'

He promised to go next day, but overslept himself, and Slimakowa barely succeeded in driving him off the day after.

He gathered some information on the way from the peasants. Many of them had volunteered for work, but only a few had been taken on, and those had soon returned, tired out.

'It 's dogs' work, not men's,' they told him; 'yet it might be worth your while taking the horses, for carters earn four roubles a day.'

'Four roubles a day!' thought Slimak, laying on to the horses.

He drove on smartly and soon came alongside the great mounds of clay on which strangers were at work, huge, strong, bearded men, wheeling large barrows. Slimak could not wonder enough at their strength and industry.

'Certainly, none of our men would do this,' he thought.

No one paid any attention to him or spoke to him. At last two Jews caught sight of him and one asked: 'What do you want, gospodarz?' The embarrassed peasant twisted his cap in his hands.

'I came to ask whether the gentlemen wanted any barley or lard?'

'My dear man,' said the Jew, 'we have our regular contractors; a nice mess we should be in, if we had to buy every sack of barley from the peasants!'

'They must be great people,' thought Slimak, 'they won't buy from the peasants, they must be buying from the gentry.'

So he bowed to the ground before the Jew, who was on the point of walking away.

'I entreat the favour of being allowed to cart for the gentlemen.'

This humility pleased the Jew.

'Go over there, my dear fellow,' he said, 'perhaps they will take you on.'

Slimak bowed again and made his way through the crowd with difficulty. Among other carts he saw those of the settlers.

Fritz Hamer came forward to meet him; he seemed to be in a position of some authority there.

'What do you want?' he asked.

'I want a job too.' The settler frowned.

'You won't get one here!'

Seeing that Slimak was looking round, he went to the inspector and spoke to him.

'No work for carters,' the latter at once shouted, 'no work! As it is we have too many, you are only getting in people's way. Be off!' The brutal way in which this order was given so bewildered the peasant that, in turning, he almost upset his cart; he drove off at full speed, feeling as if he had offended some great power which had worked enough destruction already and was now turning hills into valleys and valleys into hills.

But gradually he reflected more calmly. People from the village had been taken on, and he remembered seeing peasants' carts at the embankment. Why had he been driven away?

It was quite clear that some one wished to shut him out.

'Curse the Judases, they're outdoing the Jews,' he muttered and felt a horror of the Germans for the first time.

He told his wife briefly that there was no work, and betook himself to the settlement. Old Hamer seemed to be in the middle of a heated argument with Hirschgold and two other men. When he caught sight of the peasant he took them into the barn.

'Sly dog,' murmured Slimak; 'he knows what I've come for. I'll tell him straight to his face when he comes out.'

But at every step his courage failed him more and more. He hesitated between his desire to turn back and his unwillingness to lose a job; he hung about the fences, and looked at the women digging in their gardens. A murmur like the hum of a beehive caught his ears: one of the windows in Hamer's house was open and he looked into a schoolroom.

One of the children was reciting something in a clamorous voice, the others were talking under their breath. The schoolmaster was standing in the middle of the room, calling out 'Silence!' from time to time.

When he saw Slimak, he beckoned to his daughter to take his place, and the hubbub of voices increased. Slimak watched her trying to cope with the children.

The schoolmaster came up behind him, walking heavily.

'Did you come to see how we teach our children?' he asked, smilingly.

'Nothing of the kind,' said Slimak; 'I've come to tell Hamer that he is a scoundrel.' He related his experience.

'What have I done?' he asked. 'Soon I may not be able to earn anything; is one to starve because it pleases them?'

'The truth is,' said the schoolmaster, 'that you are a thorn in their flesh.'

'Why?'

'Your land is right in the middle of Hamer's fields and that spoils his farm, but that is not the reason as much as your hill; he wants it for a windmill. They have nothing but level ground; it 's the best land in the settlement, but no good for a windmill; if they don't put it up, one of the other settlers will.'

'And why are they so crazy after a windmill?'

'Well, it matters a great deal to them; if Wilhelm had a windmill he could marry Miller Knap's daughter from Wolka and get a thousand and twenty roubles with her; the Hamers may go bankrupt without that money. That 's why

you stick in their throats. If you sold them your land they would pay you well.'

'And I won't sell! I will neither help them to stay here nor do myself harm for their benefit; when a man leaves the land of his fathers. . . .'

'There will be trouble,' the schoolmaster said earnestly.

'Then let there be; I won't die because it pleases them.'

Slimak returned home without any further wish to see Hamer; he knew there could be no understanding between them.

Maciek had discovered at dawn one morning that a crowd had reached the river-bank by the ravines, and Slimak, hurrying thither, found some gospodarze from the village among the men.

'What is happening?'

'They are going to throw up a dam and build a bridge across the Bialka,' Wisniewski replied.

'And what are you doing here?'

'We have been taken on to cart sand.'

Slimak discovered the Hamers in the crowd.

'Nice neighbours you are!' he said bitterly, going up to them. 'Here you are sending all the way to the village for carts, and you won't let me have a job.'

'We will send for you when you are living in the village,' Fritz answered, and turned his back.

An elderly gentleman was standing near them, and Slimak turned to him and took off his cap.

'Is this justice, sir?' he said. 'The Germans are getting rich on the railway, and I don't earn a kopek. Last year two gentlemen came and promised that I should make a lot of money. Well, your honours are building the railway now, but I've

never yet taken my horses out of the stable. A German with thirty acres of ground is having a good job, and I have only ten acres and a wife and children to keep, as well as the farmhand and the girl. We shall have to starve, and it 's all because the Germans have a grudge against me.'

He had spoken rapidly and breathlessly, and after a moment of surprise the old man turned to Fritz Hamer.

' Why did you not take him on ? '

Fritz looked insolently at him.

' Is it you who has to answer for the cartage or I ? Will you pay my fines when the men fail me ? I take on those whom I can trust.'

The old man bit his lip, but did not reply.

' I can't help you, my brother,' he said ; ' you shall drive me as often as I come to this neighbourhood. It isn't much, but every little helps. Where do you live ? '

Slimak pointed to his cottage ; he was longing to speak further, but the old man turned to give some orders, and the peasant could only embrace his knees.

Old Hamer waylaid him on the way back.

' Do you see now how badly you have done for yourself ? You will do even worse, for Fritz is furious.'

' God is greater than Fritz.'

' Will you take seventy-five roubles an acre and settle on the other side of the Bug ? You will have twice as much land.'

' I would not go to the other side of the Bug for double the money ; you go, if you like ! '

When the angry men were looking back at each other, the one was standing with a stubborn face, his pipe between his clenched teeth, the other with

folded arms, smiling sadly. Each was afraid of the other.

The embankment was growing slowly from west to east. Before long thousands of carriages would roll along its line with the speed of birds, to enrich the powerful, shatter the poor, spread new customs and manners, multiply crime . . . all this is called 'the advancement of civilization'. But Slimak knew nothing of civilization and its boons, and therefore looked upon this outcome of it as ominous. The encroaching line seemed to him like the tongue of some vast reptile, and the mounds of earth to forebode four graves, his own and those of his wife and children.

Maciek also had been watching its progress, which he considered an entire revolution of the laws of nature.

'It's a monstrous thing', he said, 'to heap up so much sand on the fields near the river, and narrow the bed; when the Bialka swells, it will overflow.'

Slimak saw that the ends of the embankment were touching the river, but as they had been strengthened by brick walls he took no alarm. Nevertheless, it struck him that the Hamers were hurriedly throwing up dams on their fields in the lower places.

'Quick folk!' he thought, and contemplated doing the same, and strengthening the dams with hurdles, as soon as he had cut the hay. It occurred to him that he might do it now when he had plenty of time, but, as usual, it remained a good intention.

It was the beginning of July, when the hay had

been cut and people were gradually preparing for the harvest. Slimak had stacked his hay in the backyard, but the Germans were still driving in stakes and throwing up dams.

The summer of that year was remarkable for great heat; the bees swarmed, the corn was ripening fast, the Bialka was shallower than usual, and three of the workmen died of sunstroke. Experienced farmers feared either prolonged rain during the harvest or hail before long. One day the storm came.

The morning had been hot and sultry, the birds did not sing, the pigs refused to eat and hid in the shade behind the farmbuildings; the wind rose and fell, it blew now hot and dry, now cool and damp. By about ten o'clock a large part of the sky was lined with heavy clouds, shading from ashen-grey into iron-colour and perfect black; at times this sooty mass, seeking an outlet upon the earth, burst asunder, revealing a sinister light through the crevices. Then again the clouds lowered themselves and drowned the tops of the forest trees in mists. But a hot wind soon drove them upwards again and tore strips off them, so that they hung ragged over the fields.

Suddenly a fiery cloud appeared behind the village church; it seemed to be flying at full speed along the railway embankment, driven by the west wind; at the same time the north wind sprang up and buffeted it from the side; dust flew up from the highroads and sandhills, and the clouds began to growl.

When they heard the sound, the workmen left their tools and barrows, and filed away in two long detachments, one to the manor-house, the other

to their huts. The peasants and settlers turned the sand out of their carts with all speed and galloped home. The cattle were driven in from the fields, the women left their gardens; every place became deserted.

Thunderclap after thunderclap announced ever-fresh legions pressing into the sky and obscuring the sun. It seemed as if the earth were cowering in their presence, as a partridge cowers before the hovering hawk. The blackthorn and juniper bushes called to caution with a low, swishing noise; the troubled dust hid in the corn, where the young ears whispered to each other; the distant forests murmured.

High above, in the overcharged clouds, an evil force, with strong desire to emulate the Creator, was labouring. It took the limp element and formed an island, but before it had time to say, 'It is good', the wind had blown the island away. It raised a gigantic mountain, but before the summit had crowned it, the base had been blown from underneath. Now it created a lion, now a huge bird, but soon only torn wings and a shapeless torso dissolved into darkness. Then, seeing that the works fashioned by the eternal hands endured, and that its own phantom creations could not resist even the feeblest wind, the evil spirit was seized with a great anger and determined to destroy the earth.

It sent a flash into the river, then thundered, 'Strike those fields with hail! drench the hill!' And the obedient clouds flung themselves down. The wind whistled the réveillé, the rain beat the drum; like hounds released from the leash the clouds bounded forward . . . downward, fol-

lowing the direction to which the flashes of lightning pointed. The evil spirit had put out the sun.

After an hour's downpour the exhausted storm calmed down, and now the roar of the Bialka could be distinctly heard. It had broken down the banks, flooded the highroad and fields with dirty water and formed a lake beyond the sandhills of the railway embankment.

Soon, however, the storm had gathered fresh strength, the darkness increased, lightning seemed to flash from all parts of the horizon; perpendicular torrents of rain drowned the earth in sheets of mist. The inmates of Slimak's cottage had gathered in the front room; Maciek sat yawning on a corner of the bench, Magda, beside him, nursed the baby, singing to it in a low voice; Slimakowa was vexed that the storm was putting the fire out; Slimak was looking out of the window, thinking of his crops. Jendrek was the only cheerful one; he ran out from time to time, wetting himself to the skin, and tried to induce his brother or Magda to join him in these excursions.

'Come, Stasiek,' he cried, pulling him by the hand, 'it 's such a warm rain, it will wash you and cheer you up.'

'Leave him alone,' said his father; 'he is peevish.'

'And don't run out yourself,' added his mother. 'you are flooding the whole room. . . . The Word was made Flesh,' she added under her breath, as a terrific clap of thunder shook the house. Magda crossed herself; Jendrek laughed and cried, 'What a din! there 's another. . . . The Lord Jesus is enjoying Himself, firing off. . . .'

'Be quiet, you silly,' called his mother; 'it may strike you!'

'Let it strike!' laughed the boy boldly. 'They'll take me into the army and shoot at me, but I don't mind!' He ran out again.

'The rascal! he isn't afraid of anything,' Slimakowa said to her husband with pride in her voice. Slimak shrugged his shoulders.

'He 's a true peasant.'

Yet among that group of people with iron nerves there was one who felt all the terror of this upheaval of the elements. How was it that Stasiek, a peasant child, was so sensitive?

Like the birds he had felt the coming storm, had roamed about restlessly and watched the clouds, fancying that they were taking council together, and he guessed that their intentions were evil. He felt the pain of the beaten-down grass and shivered at the thought of the earth being chilled under sheets of water. The electricity in the air made his flesh tingle, the lightning dazzled him, and each clap of thunder was like a blow on his head. It was not that he was afraid of the storm, but he suffered under it, and his suffering spirit pondered, 'Why and whence do such terrible things come?'

He wandered from the room to the alcove, from the alcove to the room, as if he had lost his way, gazed absently out of the window and lay down on the bench, feeling all the more miserable because no one took any notice of him.

He wanted to talk to Maciek, but he was asleep; he tried Magda and found her absorbed in the baby; he was afraid of Jendrek's dragging him out of doors if he spoke to him. At last he clung to his

mother, but she was cross because of the fire and pushed him away.

'A likely thing I should amuse you, when the dinner is being spoilt!' He roamed about again, then leant against his father's knee.

'Daddy,' he said in a low voice, 'why is the storm so bad?'

'Who knows?'

'Is God doing it?'

'It must be God.'

Stasiek began to feel a little more cheerful, but his father happened to shift his position, and the child thought he had been pushed away again. He crept under the bench where Burek lay, and although the dog was soaking wet, he pressed close to him and laid his head on the faithful creature.

Unluckily his mother caught sight of him.

'Whatever 's the matter with the boy?' she cried. 'Just you come away from there, or the lightning will strike you! Out into the passage, Burek!'

She looked for a piece of wood, and the dog crept out with his tail between his legs. Stasiek was left again to his restlessness, alone in a roomful of people. Even his mother was now struck by his miserable face and gave him a piece of bread to comfort him. He bit off a mouthful, but could not swallow it and burst into tears.

'Good gracious, Stasiek, what 's the matter? Are you frightened?'

'No.'

'Then why are you so queer?'

'It hurts me here,' he said, pointing to his chest.

Slimak, who was depressed himself, thinking of

his harvest, drew him to his knee, saying: 'Don't worry! God may destroy our crop, but we won't starve all the same. He is the smallest, and yet he has more sense than the others,' he said, turning to his wife; 'he's worrying about the gospodarstwo.'

Gradually, as the storm abated, the roar of the river struck them afresh. Slimak quickly drew on his boots.

'Where are you going?' asked his wife.

'Something's wrong outside.'

He went and returned breathlessly.

'I say! It's just as I thought.'

'Is it the corn?'

'No, that hasn't suffered much, but the dam is broken.'

'Jesus! Jesus!'

'The water is up to our yard. Those scoundrel Swabians have dammed up their fields, and that has taken some more off the hill.'

'Curse them!'

'Have you looked into the stable?' asked Maciek.

'Is it likely I shouldn't? There's water in the stable, water in the cowshed, look! even the passage is flooded; but the rain is stopping, we must bale out.'

'And the hay?'

'That will dry again if God gives fine weather.'

Soon the entire household were baling in the house and farm-buildings; the fire was burning brightly, and the sun peeped out from behind the clouds.

On the other bank of the river the Germans were at work. Barelegged, and armed with long poles, they waded carefully through the flooded fields towards the river to catch the drifting logs.

Stasiek was calming down ; he was not tingling all over now. From time to time he still fancied he heard the thunder, and strained his ears, but it was only the noise of the others baling with wooden grain measures. There was much commotion in the passage where Jendrek pushed Magda about instead of baling.

'Steady there,' cried his mother, 'when I get hold of something hard I'll beat you black and blue!'

But Jendrek laughed, for he could tell by a shade in her voice that she was no longer cross.

Courage returned to Stasiek's heart. Supposing he were to peep out into the yard . . . would there still be a terrible black cloud? Why not try? He put his head out of the back door and saw the blue sky flecked with little white clouds hurrying eastwards. The cock was flapping his wings and crowing, heavy drops were sparkling on the bushes, golden streaks of sunlight penetrated into the passage, and bright reflections from the surface of the waters beckoned to him.

He flew out joyfully through the pools of water, delighting in the rainbow-coloured sheaves that were spurting from under his feet ; he stood on a plank and punted himself along with a stick, pretending that he was sailing in deep water.

'Come, Jendrek!' he called.

'Stop here and go on baling,' called out Slimakowa.

The Germans were still busy landing wood ; whenever they got hold of a specially large piece they shouted 'Hurrah!' Suddenly some big logs came floating down, and this raised their enthusiasm to such a pitch that they started sing-

ing the 'Wacht am Rhein'. For the first time in his life Stasiek, who was so sensitive to music, heard a men's chorus sung in parts. It seemed to melt into one with the bright sun; both intoxicated him; he forgot where he was and what he was doing, he stood petrified. Waves seemed to be floating towards him from the river, embracing and caressing him with invisible arms, drawing him irresistibly. He wanted to turn towards the house or call Jendrek, but he could only move forward, slowly, as in a dream, then faster . . . faster; he ran, and disappeared down the hill.

The men were singing the third verse of the 'Wacht am Rhein', when they suddenly stopped and shouted:

'Help . . . help!'

Slimak and Maciek had stopped in their work to listen to the singing; the sudden cries surprised them, but it was the labourer who was seized with apprehension.

'Run, gospodarz,' he said; 'something 's up.'

'Eh! something they have taken into their heads!'

'Help!' the cry rose again.

'Never mind, run, gospodarz,' the man urged; 'I can't keep up with you, and something . . .'

Slimak ran towards the river, and Maciek painfully dragged himself after him. Jendrek overtook him.

'What 's up? Where is Stasiek?'

Maciek stopped and heard a powerful voice calling out:

'That 's the way you look after your children, Polish beasts!'

Then Slimak appeared on the hill, holding

Stasiek in his arms. The boy's head was resting on his shoulder, his right arm hung limply. Dirty water was flowing from them both. Slimak's lips were livid, his eyes wide open. Jendrek ran towards him, slipped on the boggy hillside, scrambled up and shouted in terror : 'Daddy . . . Stasiek . . . what . . . '

'He 's drowned ! '

'You are mad,' cried the boy ; 'he 's sitting on your arm ! '

He pulled Stasiek by the shirt, and the boy's head fell over his father's shoulder.

'You see ! ' whispered Slimak.

'But he was in the backyard a minute ago.'

Slimak did not answer, he supported Stasiek's head and stumbled forward.

Slimakowa was standing in the passage, shading her eyes and waiting.

'Well, what has he been up to now ? . . . What 's this ? Has it fallen on Stasiek again ? Curse those Swabians and their singing ! '

She went up to the boy and, taking his hand, said in a trembling voice :

'Never mind, Stasiek, don't roll your eyes like that, never mind ! Come to your senses, I won't scold you. Magda, fetch some water.'

'He has had more than enough water,' murmured Slimak.

The woman started back.

'What 's the matter with him ? Why is he so wet ? '

'I have taken him out of the pool by the river.'

'That little pool ? '

'The water was only up to my waist, but it did for him.'

'Then why don't you turn him upside down? Maciek, take him by the feet . . . oh, you clumsy fellows!'

The labourer did not stir. She seized the boy herself by the legs.

Stasiek struck the ground heavily with his hands; a little blood ran from his nose.

Maciek took the child from her and carried him into the cottage, where he laid him down on the bench. They all followed him except Magda, who ran aimlessly round the yard and then, with outstretched arms, on to the highroad, crying: 'Help . . . help, if you believe in God!' She returned to the cottage, but dared not go in, crouched on the threshold with her head on her knees, groaning: 'Help . . . if you believe in God.'

Slimak dashed into the alcove, put on his sukmana and ran out, he did not know whither; he felt he must run somewhere.

A voice seemed to cry to him: 'Father . . . father . . . if you had put up a fence, your child would not have been drowned!'

And the man answered: 'It is not my fault; the Germans bewitched him with their singing.'

A cart was heard rattling on the highroad and stopped in front of the cottage. The schoolmaster got out, bareheaded and with his rod in his hand. 'How is the boy?' he called out, but did not wait for an answer and limped into the cottage.

Stasiek was lying on the bench, his mother was supporting his head on her knees and whispering to herself: 'He 's coming to. he 's a little warmer.'

The schoolmaster nudged Maciek: 'How is he?'

'What do I know? She says he 's better, but the boy doesn't move, no, he doesn't move.'

The schoolmaster went up to the boy and told his mother to make room. She got up obediently and watched the old man breathlessly, with open mouth, sobbing now and then. Slimak peeped through the open window from time to time, but he was unable to bear the sight of his child's pale face. The schoolmaster stripped the wet clothes off the little body and slowly raised and lowered his arms. There was silence while the others watched him, until Slimakowa, unable to contain herself any longer, pulled her hair down and then struck her head against the wall.

'Oh, why were you ever born?' she moaned, 'a child of gold! He recovered from all his illnesses and now he is drowned. . . . Merciful God! why dost Thou punish me so? Drowned like a puppy in a muddy pool, and no one to help!'

She sank down on her knees, while the schoolmaster persevered for half an hour, listening for the beating of the child's heart from time to time, but no sign of life appeared and, seeing that he could do no more, he covered the child's body with a cloth, silently said a prayer and went out. Maciek followed him.

In the yard he came upon Slimak; he looked like a drunken man.

'What have you come here for, schoolmaster?' he choked. 'Haven't you done us enough harm? You've killed my child with your singing . . . do you want to destroy his soul too as it is leaving him, or do you mean to bring a curse on the rest of us?'

'What is that you are saying?' said the schoolmaster in amazement.

The peasant stretched his arms and gasped for breath.

'Forgive me, sir,' he said, 'I know you are a good man. . . . God reward you,' he kissed his hand; 'but my Stasiek died through your fault all the same: you bewitched him.'

'Man!' cried the schoolmaster, 'are we not Christians like you? Do we not put away Satan and his deeds as you do?'

'But how was it he got drowned?'

'How do I know? He may have slipped.'

'But the water was so shallow he might have scrambled out, only your singing . . . that was the second time it bewitched him so that something fell on him . . . isn't it true, Maciek?'

The labourer nodded.

'Did the boy have fits?' asked the schoolmaster.

'Never.'

'And has he never been ill?'

'Never.'

Maciek shook his head. 'He's been ill since the winter.'

'Eh?' asked Slimak.

'I'm speaking the truth; Stasiek has been ill ever since he took a cold; he couldn't run without getting out of breath; once I saw it fall upon him while I was ploughing. I had to go and bring him round.'

'Why did you never say anything about it?'

'I did tell the gospodyni, but she told me to mind my own business and not to talk like a barber.'

'Well, you see,' said the schoolmaster, 'the boy was suffering from a weak heart and that killed him; he would have died young in any case.'

Slimak listened eagerly, and his consciousness seemed to return.

'Could it be that?' he murmured. 'Did the boy die a natural death?'

He tapped at the window and the woman came out, rubbing her swollen eyes.

'Why didn't you tell me that Stasiek had been ill since the winter, and couldn't run without feeling queer?'

'Of course he wasn't well,' she said; 'but what good could you have done?'

'I couldn't have done anything, for if he was to die, he was to die.'

The mother cried quietly.

'No, he couldn't escape; if he was to die he was to die; he must have felt it coming to-day during the storm, when he went about clinging to every one . . . if only it had entered my head not to let him out of my sight . . . if I had only locked him up. . . .'

'If his hour had come, he would have died in the cottage,' said the schoolmaster, departing.

Already resignation was entering into the hearts of those who mourned for Stasiek. They comforted each other, saying that no hair falls from our heads without God's will.

'Not even the wild beasts die unless it is God's will,' said Slimak: 'a hare may be shot at and escape, and then die in the open field, so that you can catch it with your hands.'

'Take my case,' said Maciek: 'the cart crushed me and they took me to the hospital, and here I am alive; but when my hour has struck I shall die, even if I were to hide under the altar. So it was with Stasiek. . . .'

'My little one, my comfort!' sobbed the mother.

'Well, he wouldn't have been much comfort,' said Slimak; 'he couldn't have done heavy farm work.'

'Oh, no!' put in Maciek.

'Or handled the beasts.'

'Oh, no!'

'He would never have made a peasant; he was such a peculiar child, he didn't care for farm work; all he cared for was roaming about and gazing into the river.'

'Yes, and he would talk to the grass and the birds, I have heard it myself,' said Maciek, 'and many times have I thought: "Poor thing! what will you do when you grow up? You'd be a queer fish even among gentlefolk, but what will it be like for you among the peasants?"'

In the evening Slimak carried Stasiek on to the bed in the alcove; his mother laid two copper coins on his eyes and lit the candle in front of the Madonna.

They put down straw in the room, but neither of them could sleep; Burek howled all night, Magda was feverish; Jendrek continually raised himself from the straw, for he fancied his brother had moved. But Stasiek did not move.

In the morning Slimak made a little coffin; carpentering came so easily to him that he could not help smiling contentedly at his own work now and then. But when he remembered what he was doing, he was seized with such passionate grief that he threw down his tools and ran out, he knew not whither.

On the third day Maciek harnessed the horses to the cart, and they drove to the village church, Jendrek keeping close to the coffin and steadying it, so that it should not rock. He even tapped, and listened if his brother were not calling.

But Stasiek was silent. He was silent when they

drove to the church, silent when the priest sprinkled holy water on him, silent when they took him to his grave and his father helped the gravedigger to lower him, and when they threw clods of earth upon him and left him alone for the first time.

Even Maciek burst into tears. Slimak hid his face in his sukmana like a Roman senator and would not let his grief be looked upon.

And a voice in his heart whispered : 'Father ! father ! if you had made a fence, your child would not have been drowned !'

But he answered : 'I am not guilty ; he died because his hour had come.'

CHAPTER IX

Autumn came with drab, melancholy stubble-fields ; the bushes in the ravines turned red ; the storks hastily left the barns and flew south ; in the few woods that remained, the birds were silent, human beings had deserted the fields ; only here and there some old German women in blue petticoats were digging up the last potatoes. Even the navvies had left, the embankment was finished, and they had dispersed all over the world. Their place was taken by a light railway bringing rails and sleepers. At first you were only aware of smoke in the distant west ; in a few days' time you discovered a chimney, and presently found that that chimney was fixed to a large cauldron which rolled along without horses, dragging after it a dozen wagons full of wood and iron. Whenever it stopped men jumped out and laid down the wood,

fastened the iron to it and drove off again. These were the proceedings which Maciek was watching daily.

'Look, how clever that is,' he said to Slimak; 'they can get their load uphill without horses. Why should we worry the beasts?'

But when the cauldron came to a dead stop where the embankment ended by the ravines and the men had taken out and disposed of the load, 'Now, what will they do?' he thought.

To the farm labourer's utter astonishment the cauldron gave a shrill whistle and moved backwards with its wagons.

Yes, there it was! Had not the Galician harvesters told him of an engine that went by itself? Had they not drunk through his money with which he was to buy boots?

'To be sure, they told me true, it goes by itself; but it creeps like old Sobieska,' he added, to comfort himself. Yet, deep down in his heart he was afraid of this new contrivance and felt that it boded no good to the neighbourhood. And though he reasoned inconsequently he was right, for with the appearance of the railway engines there also came much thieving. From pots and pans, drying on the fences, to horses in the stables, nothing was safe. The Germans had their bacon stolen from the larder; the gospodarz Marcinczak, who returned rather tipsy from absolution, was attacked by men with blackened faces and thrown out of his cart, with which the robbers drove off at breakneck speed. Even the poor tailor Niedoperz, when crossing a wood, was relieved of the three roubles he had earned with so much labour.

The railway brought Slimak no luck either. It

became increasingly difficult to buy fodder for the animals, and no one now asked him to sell his produce. The salted butter, and other produce of which he had laid in a stock, went bad, and they had to eat the fowls themselves. The Germans did all the trading with the railway men, and even in the little town no one looked at the peasant's produce.

So Slimak sat in his room and did no work. Where should he find work ? He sat by the stove and pondered. Would things continue like this ? would there always be too little hay ? would no one buy from him ? would there be no end to the thieving ? What was not under lock and key in the farm-buildings was no longer safe.

Meanwhile the Germans drove about for miles in all directions and sold all that they produced.

'Things are going badly,' said Slimakowa.

'Eh . . . they'll get straight again somehow,' he answered.

Gradually poor Stasiek was forgotten. Sometimes his mother laid one spoon too many, and then wiped her eyes with her kerchief, sometimes Magda thoughtlessly called Jendrek by his brother's name or the dog would run round the buildings looking for some one, and then lay down barking, with his head on the ground. But all this happened more and more rarely.

Jendrek had been restless since his brother's death ; he did not like to sit indoors when there was nothing to do, and roamed about. His rambles frequently ended in a visit to the schoolmaster ; out of curiosity he examined the books, and as he knew some of the letters, the schoolmaster's daughter amused herself by teaching him to spell. The boy would purposely stumble over

his words so that she should correct him and touch his shoulder to point out the mistake.

One day he took home a book to show what he had learnt, and his overjoyed mother sent the schoolmaster's daughter a couple of fowls and four dozen eggs. Slimak promised the schoolmaster five roubles when Jendrek would be able to pray from a book and ten more when he should have learnt to write. Jendrek was therefore more and more often at the settlement, either busy with his lessons or else watching the girl through the window and listening to her voice. But this happened to annoy one of the young Germans, who was a relation of the Hamers.

Under ordinary circumstances Jendrek's behaviour would have attracted his parents' attention, but they were entirely engrossed in another subject. Every day convinced them more firmly of the fact that they had too little fodder and a cow too many. They did not say so to each other, but no one in the house thought of anything else. The gospodyni thought of it when she saw the milk get less in the pails, Magda had forebodings and caressed the cows in turns, Maciek, when unobserved, even deprived the horses of a handful of hay, and Slimak would stand in front of the cowshed and sigh.

It was he himself who one night broke this tacit understanding of silence on the sad question which was becoming a crisis ; he suddenly awoke, sprang up and sat down on the edge of the bed.

'What 's the matter, Josef ?' asked his wife.

'Oh . . . I was dreaming that we had no fodder left and all the cows had died.'

'In the name of the Father and the Son . . . may you not have spoken that in an evil hour !'

'There is not enough fodder for five tails . . . it 's no good pretending.'

'Well, then, what will you do ?'

'How do I know ?'

'Perhaps one could . . .'

'Maybe sell one of them . . .' finished the husband.

The word had fallen.

Next time Slimak went to the inn he gave Josel a hint, who passed it on at once to two butchers in the little town.

When they came to the cottage, Slimakowa refused to speak to them and Magda began to cry. Slimak took them to the yard.

'Well, how is it, gospodarz, you want to sell a cow ?'

'How can I tell ?'

'Which one is it ? Let 's see her.'

Slimak said nothing, and Maciek had to take up the conversation.

'If one is to be sold, it may as well be Lysa.'

'Lead her out,' urged the butchers.

Maciek led the unfortunate cow into the yard ; she seemed astonished at being taken out at such an unusual hour.

The butchers looked her over, chattered in Yiddish and asked the price.

'How do I know ?' Slimak said, still irresolute.

'What 's the good of talking like that, you know as well as we do that she 's an old beast. We will give you fifteen roubles.'

Slimak relapsed into silence, and Maciek had to do the bargaining ; after much shouting and pulling about of the cow, they agreed on eighteen roubles. A rope was laid on her horns and the stick about her shoulders, and they started.

The cow, scenting mischief, would not go ; first she turned back to the cowshed and was dragged towards the highroad, then she lowed so miserably that Maciek went pale and Magda was heard to sob loudly : the gospodyni would not look out of the window.

The cow finally planted herself firmly on the ground with her four feet rigidly fixed, and looked at Slimak with rolling eyes as if to say : 'Look, gospodarz, what they are doing to me . . . for six years I have been with you and have honestly done my duty, stand by me now.'

Slimak did not move, and the cow at last allowed herself to be led away, but when she had been plodding along for a little distance, he slowly followed. He pressed the Jews' money in his hand and thought :

'Ought I to have sold you ? I should never have done it if the merciful God had not been angry with us ; but we might all starve.'

He stood still, leant against the railings and turned all his misfortunes over in his mind ; now and then the thought that he might still run and buy her back stole into his mind.

He suddenly noticed that old Hamer had come close up to him.

'Are you coming to see me, gospodarz ?' he asked.

'I'll come, if you will sell me fodder.'

'Fodder won't help you. A peasant among settlers will always be at a disadvantage,' said the old man, with his pipe between his teeth. 'Sell me your land ; I'll give you a hundred roubles an acre.'

Slimak shook his head. 'You are mad, Pan

Hamer, I don't know what you mean. Isn't it enough that I am obliged to sell the beast? Now you want me to sell everything. If you want me to leave, carry me out into the churchyard. It is nothing to you Germans to move from place to place, you are a roving people and have no country, but a peasant is like a stone by the wayside. I know everything here by heart. I have moved every clod of earth with my own hands; now you say: sell and go elsewhere. Wherever I went I should be dazed and lost; when I looked at a bush I should say: that did not grow at home; the soil would be different and even the sun would not set in the same place. And what should I tell my father if he were to come looking for me when it gets too hot for him in Purgatory? He would ask me how I was to find his grave again, and Stasiek's, poor Stasiek who has laid down his head, thanks to you!'

Hamer was trembling with rage.

'What rubbish the man is talking!' he cried, 'have not numbers of peasants settled afresh in Volhynia? His father will come looking for him! . . . You had better look out that you don't go to Purgatory soon yourself for your obstinacy, and ruin me into the bargain. You are ruining my son now, because I can't build him a windmill. Here I am offering you a hundred roubles an acre, confound it all!'

'Say what you like, but I won't sell you my land.'

'You'll sell it all right,' said Hamer, shaking his fist, 'but I shan't buy it; you won't last out a year among us.'

He turned away abruptly.

'And I don't want that lad to stroll in and out

of the settlement,' he called back, 'I don't keep a schoolmaster here for you!'

'That 's nothing to me; he needn't go if you grudge him the room.'

'Yes, I grudge him the room,' the old man retorted viciously, 'the father is a dolt, let the son be a dolt too.'

Slimak's regret for the cow was drowned in his anger. 'All right, let them cut her throat,' he thought, but remembering that the poor beast could not help his quarrel with Hamer, he sighed.

There were fresh lamentations at home; Magda was blubbering because she had been given notice. Slimak sat down on the bench and listened to his wife comforting the girl.

'It 's true, we are not short of food,' she said, 'but how am I to get the money for your wages? You are a big girl and ought to have a rise after the New Year. We haven't enough work for you; go to your uncle at once, tell him how things are going from bad to worse here, and fall at his feet and ask him to find you another place. Please God, you will come back to us.'

'Ho,' murmured Maciek from his corner, 'there 's no returning; when you're gone, you're gone; first the cow, then Magda, now my turn will come.'

'Oh, you, Maciek, you will stay,' said Slimakowa, 'there must be some one to look after the horses, and if we don't give you your wages one year, you'll get them the next, but we can't do that to Magda, she is young.'

'That 's true,' said Maciek on reflection, 'and it 's kind of you to think of the girl first.'

Slimak was silently admiring his wife's good sense, but at the same time he felt acute regret

and apprehension at all these changes ; everything had been going on harmoniously for years, and now one day sufficed to send both the cow and Magda away.

'What shall I do ?' he ruminated, 'shall I try to set up as a carpenter, or shall I apply to his Reverence for advice ? I might ask him at the same time to say a Mass, but maybe he would say the Mass and not give the advice. It will all come right ; God strikes until His hand is tired ; then He looks down in favour again on those who suffer patiently.' So he waited.

Magda had found another situation by November ; her place in the gospodarstwo soon grew cold, no one thought or talked of her, and only the gospodyni asked herself sometimes : 'Were there really a Stasiek in this room once and a Magda pottering about, and three cows in the shed ?'

Meanwhile the thieving increased. Slimak daily thought of putting bolts and padlocks on the farm-buildings, or at least long poles in front of the stable door. But whenever he reached for the hatchet, it always lay too far off, or his arm was too short ; anyhow he left it, and the thought of buying padlocks when times were hard, made him feel quite faint. He hid the money at the bottom of the chest so that it should not tempt him. 'I must wait till the spring,' he thought ; 'after all, there are Maciek and Burek, they are sharp enough.'

Burek confirmed this opinion by much howling.

One very dark night, when sleet was falling, Maciek heard him barking more furiously than usual, and attacking some one in the direction of the ravines. He jumped up and waked Slimak ;

armed with hatchets they waited in the yard. A heavy tread approached behind the barn as of some one carrying a load. 'At them!' they urged Burek, who, feeling himself backed up, attacked furiously.

'Shall we go for them?' asked Maciek.

Slimak hesitated. 'I don't know how many there are.'

At that moment a light flashed up from the settlement, horses clattered. Seeing that help was approaching, Slimak dashed behind the barn and called out: 'Hey there! who are you?'

Something heavy fell to the ground.

'You wait! policeman for the Swabians, you shall soon know who we are!' answered a voice in the darkness.

'Catch him!' cried Slimak and Maciek simultaneously, but the thief had escaped to the ravines. When the Germans on horseback came up, Slimak lit a torch and ran behind the barn. A pig's carcass lay in a puddle.

'That 's our hog,' cried Fritz, 'they stole it from under our noses and while there was a light in the house.'

'Daredevils!' muttered Maciek.

'To tell you the truth,' laughed Hamer's farm-hand, 'we thought it was you who had done it.'

'Go to the devil!'

'Let 's go after them,' Fritz interrupted quickly.

'Go on! I . . . steal your hog! indeed!'

'Let me go, father,' begged Jendrek.

'Go indoors! We've saved them a hog and the thieves will revenge themselves on us; and here they come and accuse me of being a thief myself.' Fritz Hamer swore at the farm-hand for his clumsi-

ness and tried to pacify the peasant, but he turned his back on him. Fritz had lost his zeal for pursuing the thieves, took up his hog and disappeared into the darkness.

After a few days the police-sergeant drove up, cross-examined every one, explored the ravines, perspired, made himself muddy, and found no one. He came to the very just conclusion that the thieves must have escaped long ago. So he told Slimakowa to put some butter and a speckled hen into his cart and returned home.

The thieving stopped for a while, and winter came on. The ground was warmly covered as with a sheepskin; ice as hard as flint froze on the Bialka, the Lord wrapped the branches of the trees securely in shirts of snow. But Slimak was still meditating on hasps and bolts.

One evening, as he sat filling the room with smoke from his pipe, shifting his feet and arriving at the second part of his meditations, namely that 'What is done too soon is the devil's,' Jendrek excitedly burst into the room. His mother was busy with the fire and paid no attention to him, but his father noticed, although they were sparing of light in the cottage, that his sukmana was torn and he looked bruised and dishevelled. Looking at him out of the corner of his eyes, Slimak emptied his pipe and said: 'Some one has been boxing your ears three times over.'

'I gave him one better,' said the boy scowling.

As the mother had gone out and did not hear the conversation, the father did not hurry himself; he cleaned his choked pipe, blew through it and indifferently inquired, 'Who 's been treating you like this?'

'That scoundrel, Hermann.' The boy was hitching up his shoulders as if he had been stung.

'And what were you doing at Hamer's when you had been told not to go there?'

'I was looking at the schoolmaster through the window,' said Jendrek blushing, and added quickly, 'That German dog ran out from the kitchen and shouted: "You are spying about here, you thief!" "What have I stolen?" I say, and he: "Nothing yet, but you will steal some day; be off, or I'll box your ears." "Try!" I say. "I've tried before," says he; "take this!"'

'That was smart of the Swabian,' said Slimak, 'and did you do nothing to him?'

'Why should I do nothing to him? I snatched up a log and hit him over the head two or three times, but the coward started bleeding and gave in; I should have liked to have given him more, but they came running out of their houses and I made off.'

'So they didn't catch you?'

'Bah, how can they catch me, when I run like a hare?'

'Confound the boy,' said his mother, who had come in, 'the Swabians will beat him small.'

'He can always give them the slip,' said Slimak, lit his pipe, and resumed his meditations on hasps and bolts.

But these were interrupted the next afternoon by a visit from the Hamers; their cousin, Hermann, had his head so tightly bandaged that hardly anything was visible of his face. They stood outside the gate and shouted to Maciek to call his master. Slimak hastily fastened his belt and stepped out. 'What do you want?' he said.

'We are going to the police-station to take out a summons against that Jendrek of yours; look what he has done to Hermann; we have a certificate from the surgeon that his injuries are serious.'

'He came ogling the schoolmaster's daughter, now he shall ogle his prison bars,' Hermann added thickly behind his bandages.

Slimak was getting worried.

'You ought to be ashamed of yourselves,' he said, 'to take out a summons for a bit of boy's nonsense; didn't Hermann box his ears too? But we don't take out summonses for that sort of thing.'

'Oh, rather! I gave it him,' mumbled Hermann, 'but where 's the blood? where 's the doctor's certificate?'

'You're a nice one,' said Slimak bitterly, 'there was no policeman to certify that it was we who saved you the hog, but when a boy plays a prank on you, you go to law.'

'Perhaps with you a hog means as much as a man,' sneered Fritz; 'with us it is different.'

Slimak's meditations now turned from bolts and padlocks to prisons. He talked the matter over with Maciek.

'When they put our small Jendrek in Court by the side of that big Hermann, I reckon they won't do much to him.'

'They'll do nothing to him,' agreed the labourer.

'All the same, I should like to know what the punishment is for thrashing a man.'

'They don't trouble their heads much about it. When Potocka beat her neighbour over the head with a saucepan, they just fined her.'

'That 's true, but I am afraid they think more of the Germans than of our people.'

'How could they think more of unbelievers ?'

'Look at the police-sergeant, he talks to Hamer as he wouldn't even talk to Gryb.'

'That is so, but when he has looked round to see that no one is listening, he tells you that a German is a mangy dog. You see, the Germans have their Kaiser, but he 's nothing like as great as our Czar ; I have it from a soldier who was in the hospital, and he used to say : " Bah, he 's nothing compared to ours ! "'

This greatly reassured Slimak, and he went to church with his wife and son the next Sunday to find out what others, familiar with the ways of the law, thought of the matter. Maciek remained at home to look after the dinner and the baby.

It was past noon when Burek began to bark furiously. Maciek looked out and saw a man dressed like the townspeople standing at the gate ; he had pulled his cap well over his face. The farm-labourer went outside.

'What 's up ?'

'Take pity on us, gospodarz,' said the stranger, 'our sledge has broken down close by, and I can't mend it, because they have stolen the hatchet out of my basket last night.'

Maciek looked doubtful. 'Have you come far ?'

'Twenty-five miles ; my wife and I are driving twelve miles further. I will give you good vodka and sausages if you will help us.'

Maciek's suspicions lessened when vodka was mentioned. He shook his head and crossed himself, but ultimately decided that one must help

one's neighbour, fetched the hatchet and went out with the stranger.

He found a one-horse sledge standing near the farm. A woman, even more smartly dressed than the man, sat huddled up in a corner; she blessed Maciek in a tearful voice, but her husband did more, he poured out a large tumblerful of vodka and offered it to the labourer, drinking to his health first. Maciek apologized, as the ceremony demanded, then took a long pull, till the tears came into his eyes. He set about mending the sledge, and although it was a small job and did not take him more than half an hour, the strangers thanked him extravagantly, the woman gave him half a sausage and some roast pork, and the man exclaimed: 'I have travelled far and wide, but I have never found a more obliging peasant than you are, brother. I should like to leave you a remembrance. Have you got a bottle?'

'I think I could find one,' said Maciek, in a voice trembling with delight. The man unceremoniously pushed his wife on one side and drew a large bottle from underneath the seat.

'We are off now,' he said, 'we will go to the gospodarstwo and you shall give me some nails in case of another breakdown, and I will leave you some of this cordial in return. Mind, if your head or your stomach aches or you are worried and can't sleep, take a glassful of this: all your worries will at once disappear. Take good care of it and don't on any account give a drop away, it 's a speciality; my grandfather got it from the monks at Radecznica, it 's as good as holy water.'

Maciek went into the house, the stranger remained in the yard, looking carelessly round the

buildings, while Burek barked madly at him. At any other time the dog's anger would have roused Maciek's suspicion, but how could one think anything but well of a guest who had already given vodka and sausages and who was offering more drink ? He smilingly offered a big-bellied bottle to the traveller, who poured half a pint of the cordial into it, and when he took leave he repeated the warning that it should be used only in case of need.

Maciek stuffed a piece of rag into the neck of the bottle and hid it in the stable. He felt a strong desire to taste the drink, if only a drop, but he resisted.

' Supposing I were to get ill . . . better keep it.'

He rocked the baby to sleep and then woke her up again to tell her about the hospital and his broken leg, about the travellers who had left him such a magnificent present, but nothing could take his thoughts away from the monks' cordial. The big-bellied bottle seemed to hover over the pots and pans on the stove, it blossomed out of the wall, it almost tapped at the window, but Maciek blinked his eyes and thought : ' Leave me alone, you will come in useful some day ! '

Shortly before sunset he heard cheerful singing in the road, and, quickly stepping outside, he saw the gospodarz and his family returning from church. They were silhouetted against the red sky in the white landscape. Jendrek, his head in the air and his arms crossed behind his back, was walking on the left side of the road, the gospodyni in her blue Sunday skirt, and her jacket unbuttoned, so that her white chemise and bare chest were showing, on the right. The gospodarz, his cap awry, and holding up his sukmana as for a dance, lurched from right to left and from left to

right, singing. The labourer laughed, not because they were drunk, but because it pleased him to see them enjoying themselves.

'Do you know, Maciek,' cried Slimak from afar, 'do you know the Swabians can't hurt us!'

He ran up full tilt and supported himself on Maciek's neck.

'Do you know,' cried the gospodyni, coming up, 'we have seen Jasiek Gryb who knows all about the law; we told him about Jendrek's giving it to Hermann, and he swore by a happy death that the Court would let Jendrek off; Jasiek has been tried for these tricks himself, he knows.'

'Let them try and put me in prison!' shouted Jendrek.

It was in this frame of mind that they sat down, but somehow the dinner was not a success. Slimakowa poured most of the sauerkraut over the table, the gospodarz had no appetite, and Jendrek had forgotten how to hold a spoon, scalded his father's foot with soup and finally fell asleep. His parents followed his example, so Maciek was left to himself again. The big-bellied bottle started pursuing him immediately. It availed nothing that he busied himself with the fire and the wick of the flickering lamp. The snoring around him disposed him to sleep and the smell of vodka that had been introduced into the room filled him with longing. In vain he tried to keep off the thoughts that circled like moths round the light. When he forgot his misery at the hospital, he thought of the forlornness of the abandoned baby, and when he put that aside his own needs overwhelmed him again. 'It 's no use,' he muttered, 'I must go to bed.'

He wrapped the child in the sheepskin and

went into the stable. He lay down on the straw, the warmth of the horses tempered the cold, and Maciek closed his eyes, but sleep would not come ; it was too early yet.

As he turned from side to side, his hand came in contact with the bottle ; he pushed it away ; but, violating the law of inertia, it thrust itself irresistibly into his hand ; the rag remained between his fingers, and when he mechanically lifted it to his eyes in the half-light, the strange vessel leapt to his lips of its own accord. Before he was conscious of what he was doing, Maciek had pulled a long draft of the health-giving speciality. He gulped it down and pulled a wry face. The drink was not only strong, it was nauseous ; it simply tasted like ordinary medicine. ' Well, that wasn't worth longing for ! ' he thought, as he stuffed up the neck of the bottle again. He resolved to be more temperate in future with a liquor which was not distinguished for a good taste.

Maciek said a prayer and felt warm and calm. He remembered the home-coming of the gospodarz's family : they all stood before his eyes as if they were alive. Suddenly Slimak and Jendrek vanished and only Slimakowa remained near him in her unbuttoned jacket which exposed rows of corals and her bare white chest. He closed his eyelids and pressed them with his fingers, so as not to look, but still he saw her, smiling at him in a strange way. He hid his head in the sheepskin—it was in vain ; the woman stood there and smiled in a way that sent the fever through his veins. His heart beat violently ; he turned his head to the wall and, terror-stricken, heard her voice whispering close to him : ' Move up ! '

'Where am I to move to?' groaned Maciek.

A warm hand seemed to embrace his neck.

Then his mattress began to ascend with him, he flew . . . flew. God! was he falling or being lifted into the air? he felt as light as a feather, as smoke. He opened his eyes for a moment and saw stars glittering in a dark sky over a snowy landscape. How could he be seeing the sky? No . . . he must have made a mistake; darkness was surrounding him again. He wanted to move, but could not; besides, why should he move, when he felt so extraordinarily comfortable? there was not a thing in the world that it would be worth while moving a finger for, nothing but sleep mattered, sleep without awakening. He sighed heavily and slept and slept.

A sensation of pain woke Maciek from a dreamless sleep which must have lasted about ten hours. He felt himself violently shaken, kicked in the ribs and on the head, tugged by his arms and legs.

'Get up, you thief . . . get up!' a voice was shouting at him.

He tried to get up, but turned over on the other side instead. The blows and tugs recommenced, and the voice, choked with rage, continued:

'Get up! I wish the holy earth had never carried you!'

At last Maciek roused himself and sat up; the light hurt his eyes, his head felt heavy like a rock; so he closed his eyes again, supported his head and tried to think; immediately he received a blow in the face from a fist. When at last he opened his eyes, he saw that it was Slimak who was standing over him, mad with rage.

'What are you hitting me for?' he asked in amazement.

'Where are the horses, you thief?' shouted Slimak.

'Horses? what horses?'

He was suddenly seized with sickness. Coming to himself a little, he looked round. Yes, something seemed to be missing from the stable; he wiped his forehead, looked again . . . the stable was empty.

'But where are the horses?' he asked.

'Where?' cried Slimak, 'where your brothers have taken them, you thief.' The labourer held out his hands.

'I never took them out. I haven't stirred from here all night, something must have happened . . . I am ill.'

He staggered up and had to support himself.

'What is that? You are trying to make out that you have lost your wits. You know quite well that the horses have been stolen. Whoever stole them must have opened the door and led them over you.'

'God help me! no one opened the door, no one led them over me,' cried Maciek, bursting into sobs.

'Dad! Burek is lying dead behind the fence,' cried Jendrek, who came running up with his mother.

'They have poisoned him,' said the woman, 'the foam has frozen on his mouth.'

Maciek sank down in the open door, unable to stand any longer.

'The devil has got him too, he isn't like himself, something has fallen on him,' said Slimak.

'And may he keep it till he dies,' cried the woman, 'here he is sleeping in the stable and lets the horses be stolen. May the ground spit him out!'

Jendrek was looking for a stone, but his parents, taking notice of the man's deathly pallor and his sunken eyes for the first time, restrained him.

'Maybe they have poisoned him too,' whispered Slimakowa.

Slimak shrugged his shoulders, not knowing what to make of it.

He began to question Maciek: Had anything happened in his absence?

Slowly and with difficulty, but concealing nothing, Maciek told his story.

'Of course they gave me some filthy stuff, and then they made off with the horses,' he added, sobbing.

But instead of taking pity on him, Slimak burst out afresh:

'What? you took drink from strangers and never told me anything about it?'

'Why should I have bothered you, gospodarz, when you were a little bit screwed yourself?'

'What 's that to do with you?' bawled Slimak, 'dogs have no right to notice whether one is drunk or not, they have to be all the more watchful when one is! You are a thief like the others, only you are worse. I took you in when you were starving, and you've robbed me in return.'

'Don't talk like that,' groaned Maciek, crawling to Slimak's feet, 'I have saved a few roubles from my wages, and there is my little chest and a bit of sheepskin and my sukmana; take it all, but don't say I robbed you. Your dog has not been more faithful, and they have poisoned him too.'

'Don't bother me,' cried Slimak, thrusting him aside, 'the fellow offers me his wages and his box when the horses were worth twenty-eight roubles.

I haven't taken twenty-eight roubles the whole year. If you were my own son I wouldn't let you off; neither of the boys have ever cost me as much.'

His anger overcame him, he beat himself with his clenched fists.

'Find the horses,' he cried, 'or I will give you in charge, go where you like, look where you like, but don't show your face here without them or one of us will die! I loathe you. Take that bastard or we will let it starve, and be off!'

'I will find the horses,' said Maciek, and drew his old sheepskin round him with trembling hands; 'perhaps God will help me.'

'The devil will help you, you low scoundrel,' said Slimak, and turned away.

'And leave your box,' added Jendrek.

'He has paid us out for our kindness,' whimpered Slimakowa, wiping her eyes. They went into the house.

Not one of them had a kind glance to spare for Maciek, although he was leaving them for ever.

Slowly and painfully he wrapped the child up in an old bit of a shirt and a shawl, fastened his belt round himself and looked for a stick.

His head was aching as if he were going through a severe illness; he was unable to reason out the situation. He felt no resentment towards Slimak for having beaten him and driven him away; the gospodarz was in the right, of course; neither was he afraid of having no roof over his head; people like him never had any roof of their own; he was not thinking of the future. Another thought was torturing him . . . the horses. For Slimak the horses were part of his working machinery, for Maciek they were friends and brothers. Who but

they in the whole world had longed for him, had greeted him heartily when he returned, or looked after him when he went out ? No one but Wojtek and Kasztan. For years they had shared hardships together. Now they were gone, perhaps led away into misery, through his, Maciek's, fault.

He fancied he heard them neighing. They were becoming sensible of what was happening to them and were calling to him for help !

' I am coming, I am coming,' he muttered, took the child on his arm, seized the stick and limped forth. He did not look round, he would see the gospodarstwo again when he came back with the horses.

He saw Burek lying stark behind the barn, but he had no thought to spare for him ; he peered for the traces of the horses' feet. There they were, stamped into the snow as into wax ; Kasztan's large feet and the broken hoof of Wojtek ; here the thieves had mounted and ridden off at a slow trot. How bold, how sure of themselves they had been ! But Maciek will find you ! The peasant rancour in him had been awakened. If you escape to the end of the world he will pursue you ; if you dig yourselves into the ground he will dig you out with his hands ; if you escape to Heaven he will stand at the gate and importune the saints until they fly all over the universe and give him back the horses !

On the highroad the tracks became less distinct, but they were still recognizable. Maciek could read the whole history of the peregrination in them. Here Kasztan had been startled and had shied ; here the thief had dismounted and altered Wojtek's bridle. What gentlemen they were.

these thieves, they came stealing in new boots, such as no gentleman need have been ashamed of!

Near the church the tracks became confused and, what was worse, divided. Kasztan had been ridden to the right and Wojtek to the left. After reflecting for a moment, Maciek followed the latter track, possibly because it was clearer, but most likely because he loved that little horse the best. About noon he found himself near the village where Magda's uncle, the Soltys Grochowski, lived. He turned in there, hoping for a bite of food; he was hungry and the little girl was crying.

Grochowski was at home and in the middle of receiving a sound rating from his wife for no particular reason but just for the pleasure of it. The huge man was sitting on the bench by the wall, with one arm on the table and the other on the window-sill, listening with an expression of fixed attention to his wife's homilies; this attention was, however, assumed, for whenever she buried her head among the pots and pans on the stove he yawned and stretched himself, pulling a face as if the conversation had long been distasteful to him.

As his wife was in the habit of relenting before strangers, so as not to prejudice his office, Grochowski hailed Maciek's arrival gladly, and ordered food for him and milk for the little girl, adding cold meat and vodka to the repast when he heard the news that Slimak's horses had been stolen and that Maciek was applying to him for advice. He even talked of drawing up a statement, but the necessary implements were not at hand. So he drew Maciek into the alcove for a long, whispered conversation, the upshot of which was that they

must proceed with caution upon the track of the thieves, as certain strong influences tied Grochowski's hands until he had clearer evidence. Maciek was also given to understand why Jasiek Gryb had entertained the gospodarz and his family so liberally, and Grochowski even seemed to know the man who had presented Maciek with the monks' cordial and said that the woman in the sledge was not a woman at all.

'I will do whatever you tell me, Soltys,' said Maciek, embracing his knees, 'even if you should send me to my death.'

'It is no use tracking near here,' said the Soltys, 'we know all about that, but it would be useful to know where the other track leads to. Follow that as far as you can, and if you find any clue let me know at once. You ought to be back here by to-morrow.'

'And shall we find the horses?'

'We shall find them even if we had to drag them out of the thieves' bowels,' said the Soltys, looking fierce.

It was about two o'clock when Maciek was ready to start. The Soltys hinted that the child had better be left behind, but his wife was so angry at the suggestion that he desisted. So Maciek tied her up again in the old bits of clothing and went his way.

He easily found Kasztan's tracks on the highroad and followed them for an hour, when he thought that he must be nearing the thieves' quarters, for the tracks had been covered up, and finally led into the ravines. The frost was pinching harder and harder, but the breathless man scarcely noticed the cold. From time to time clouds flew over the

sky and snow drifted along the ground in gusts; Maciek searched all the more eagerly, so as not to miss the track before it should be covered with fresh drifts. On and on he walked, never even noticing that darkness was coming on and the snow was falling faster.

Now and then he would sit down for a moment, too tired to go on, but he jumped up again, for he fancied he heard Kasztan neighing. Probably it was his aching head that produced these sounds, but at last they became so loud that he left the track and cut right across the hill in the direction from which they seemed to proceed. With his last remaining strength he struggled with the bushes, fell, scrambled to his feet, and continued. Then the neighing ceased and he found that he was in the ravines, knee-deep in snow, and night was falling.

With difficulty he dragged himself on to a knoll to see where he was. He could see nothing but snow—snow to the right and to the left, here and there intercepted by bushes, the last streak of light had faded from the sky.

He tried to descend; in one place the slope was too steep, in another there were too many bushes; at last he decided on an easier place and put his stick forward; it gave way, and he fell after it for several yards. It was fortunate that the snow lay waist-deep in this spot.

The frightened child began its low sobbing, it had always been too weak to cry heartily. Fear was knocking at Maciek's heart.

'Surely, I can't have lost my way?' he thought, 'these are our ravines that I know so well, yet I don't see my way out of them.'

He started walking again, alternately in low and

deep snow, until he came upon a place that had been trodden down recently. He knelt down and felt the tracks with his hands. They were his own footprints.

'Dear me! I've been going round in a circle,' he muttered, and tried another corridor of ravines which presently led him to the place where he had slid down the hill. He fancied he heard murmurings overhead and looked up, but it was only the rustling of the bushes. The wind had sprung up on the hillside and was driving before it clouds of fine snow which stung his face and hands like gnats.

'Can it be that my hour has come?' he thought; 'No, no,' he whispered, 'not till I have found the horses, else they will take me for a thief.' He wrapped the child more closely in the coverings; she had fallen asleep in spite of shaking and discomfort; he walked about aimlessly, so as to keep moving.

'I won't be a fool and sit down,' he muttered, 'if I sit down I shall be frozen, and the thieves will keep the horses.'

The hard snow fell faster and faster, whitening Maciek from head to foot; the wind swept along the top of the hills, and as he listened to it, the man was glad that he had not been caught in the open.

'It 's quite warm here,' he said, 'but all the same I'm not going to sit down, I must keep on walking till the morning.'

But it was not yet midnight and Maciek's legs began to refuse obedience, he could no longer push away the snow with his feet; he stopped and stamped, but that was even more tiring; he leant against the sides of the little cavity. The spot was excellent; it was raised above the ravine, and the little hollow was just large enough to hold a man;

bushes sheltered it against the snow on all sides. But the crowning advantage was a jutting piece of rock, about the size of a stool.

'No, I won't sit down,' he determined, 'I know I should get frozen. . . . It 's true,' he added after a while, 'it would not do to go to sleep, but it can't hurt to sit down for a bit.'

He boldly sat down, drew his cap over his ears and the clothes round the sleeping child, and decided that he would alternately rest and stamp, and so await the morning.

'So long as I don't go to sleep,' he kept on reminding himself. He fancied the air was getting a little warmer and his feet were thawing. Instead of the cold he felt ants creeping under the soles of his feet. They crept in among his toes, swarmed over his injured leg, then over the other, and reached his knees. In a mysterious way one had suddenly settled on his nose; he wanted to flick it off, but a whole swarm was sitting on his arms. He decided not to drive them away, for in the first place they were keeping him awake, and then he rather liked them. He smiled, as one reached his waist, and did not ask how they came to be there. It was not surprising that there should be ant-hills in the ravines, and he forgot that it was winter.

'So long as I don't go to sleep . . . so long as I don't go to sleep. . . .' But at last he asked himself 'Why am I not to go to sleep? It 's night and I am in the stable? The thieves might be coming, that 's it!'

He grasped his stick more firmly; whispers seemed to be stirring all round.

'Oho! they are opening the stable door, there is the snow, this time I will give it to them. . . .'

The thieves must have found out that he was on the watch this time and made off. Maciek laughed; now he could go to sleep. He straightened his back, pressed the little girl close.

'Just a moment's sleep,' he reminded himself, 'I've something to do, but what is it? Ploughing? no, that's done. Water the horses . . . the horses. . . .'

After midnight the moon dispersed the clouds and the new moon peeped out and looked straight into the sleeper's face: but the man did not move. Fresh clouds came up and hid the moon, yet he did not move. He sat in the hollow of the hill, his head leaning against its side, the child clasped to his breast.

At last the sun rose, but even then he did not move. He seemed to be gazing in astonishment at the railway line, not more than twenty steps away from his resting place.

The sun was high when a signalman came along the permanent way. He caught sight of the sleeper and shouted, but there was no answer, and the man approached.

'Heh, father! have you been drinking?' he called out, as he went round the hollow at a distance. At last, hardly believing his eyes, he went up to the silent sitter and touched his hand.

Maciek's and the child's faces were hard, as if they had been cast in wax, hoarfrost lay on his lashes, and frozen moisture stood on the child's lips. The signalman's arms dropped in astonishment; he wanted to call for help, but remembered that no one would hear him. He turned and ran at full speed to the Soltys' office.

In the course of an hour or two a sledge with

some men arrived to remove the bodies. But Maciek's was frozen so hard that it was impossible to open his arms or straighten his legs, so they put him in the sledge as he was. He went for his last drive with the child on his knees, his head resting against the rail, and his face turned upwards, as though he had done with human reckoning and was recounting his wrongs to his Creator.

When the mournful procession stopped, a small crowd of peasants, women, and Jews gathered in front of the Wojt's office. The Wojt, his clerk, and Grochowski were standing together. A shudder of remorse seized the latter, he guessed who the man and child were that had been found, frozen to death. He explained to the crowd what Maciek had told him.

When he had finished, the men turned away, the women groaned, the Jews spat on the ground; only Jasiek, the son of the rich peasant Gryb, lighted an expensive cigar and smiled. He put his hands in the pockets of his sheepskin coat, stuck out first one foot, then the other, to display his elegant top-boots that reached above his knees, sucked his cigar, and continued to smile. The men looked at him with aversion, but the women, although shocked, did not think him repulsive. Was he not a tall, broadshouldered, graceful lad, with a complexion like milk and blood, and eyes the colour of a bluebottle, and did he not trim his moustaches and beard like a nobleman? It was a pity he was not a foreman with plenty of opportunities of ordering the girls about! The men, however, were whispering among themselves that he was a scoundrel who would come to a bad end.

'Certainly it was wrong of Slimak to send the

poor wretch away in such weather,' said the Wojt.

'It was a shame,' murmured the women.

'It 's only natural he should be angry when his horses had been stolen,' said one of the men.

'Driving him away did not bring the horses back, and he will have the two poor souls on his conscience till he dies,' cried an old woman.

Grochowski was seized with shuddering again.

'It was not so much that Slimak drove him away, but that he himself was anxious to go,' he said quickly, 'he wanted to track the thieves;' here he gave a quick glance at Jasiek, who returned it insolently, and observed that horse-thieves were sharp, and more people might meet their death in tracking them.

'They may find that there is a limit to it,' said Grochowski.

The policeman now proceeded to examine the corpses, and the Wojt was standing by with a wry face, as if he had bitten on a peppercorn.

'We must drive them to the district police-court,' he said; 'Stojka,' turning to the owner of the sledge, 'drive on, we will overtake you presently. This is the first time that any one in this parish has ever been frozen to death.'

Stojka demurred and scratched his head, but he took up the reins and lashed the horses; after all, it was only a few versts, and one need not look much at the passengers. He walked by the side of the sledge and Grochowski and a man who was to make closer acquaintance with the police-court, for spoiling his neighbour's bucket, went with him.

It so happened that, just as the Wojt was dispatching the bodies to the police-court, the

police officer was sending ' Silly Zoska ' back to her native village. A few months after leaving her child in Maciek's care she had been arrested ; the reason was unknown to her. As a matter of fact she had been accused of begging, vagrancy, and attempted arson. After the discovery of each new crime, they had taken her from police-station to prison, from prison to infirmary, from infirmary to another prison, and so on for a whole year.

During her peregrinations Zoska had behaved with complete indifference ; when she was taken to a new place she would worry at first whether she would find work. After that she became apathetic and slept the greater part of the time, on her plank bed, or waiting in corridors and prison-yards. It was all the same to her. At times she began to long for freedom and her child, and then she fell into accesses of fury. Now they were sending her back under escort of two peasants ; one carried the papers relating to her case, and the other had come to keep him company. She had a boot on one foot and a sandal on the other, a sukmana in holes, and a handkerchief like a sieve on her head. She walked quickly in front of the men, as if she were in a hurry to get back, yet neither the familiar neighbourhood nor the hard frost seemed to make any impression on her. When the men called out : ' Heh ! not so fast ! ' she stood as still as a post, and waited till they told her to go on.

' She 's quite daft ! ' said one.

' She 's always been like that,' said the other, who had known her a long time, ' yet she 's not bad at rough work.'

A few versts from the village, where the chimneys

peeped out from beyond the snowy hills, they came upon the little cortège. The attendants, noticing something unusual in the look of it, stopped and talked to the Soltys.

'Look, Zoska,' said the latter to the woman who was standing by indifferently, 'that is your little girl.'

She approached without seeming to understand; slowly, however, her face acquired a human expression.

'What 's fallen upon them?'

'They have been frozen.'

'Why have they been frozen?'

'Slimak drove them out of the house.'

'Slimak drove them out of the house?' she repeated, fingering the bodies, 'yes, that 's my little girl, she 's grown a bit; whoever heard of a child being frozen to death? . . . she was meant to come to a bad end. As God loves me, yes, that 's my girl, my little girl—they've murdered her; look at her!' she suddenly became animated.

'Drive on,' said the Soltys, 'we must be getting on.'

The horses started, Zoska tried to get into the sledge.

'What are you doing?' cried her attendants, pulling her back.

'That 's my little girl!' cried Zoska, holding on.

'What if she is yours?' said the Soltys, 'there 's one road for you and another for her.'

'She 's my little girl, mine!' With both hands the woman held on to the sledge, but the peasant whipped up the horses and she fell to the ground; she grasped the runners and was dragged along for several yards.

'Don't behave like a lunatic,' cried the men, detaching her with difficulty from the fast-moving sledge; she would have run after it, but one of them knelt on her feet and the other held her by the shoulders.

'She 's my little girl; Slimak has let her freeze to death. . . . God punish him, may he freeze to death himself!' she screamed.

Gradually, as the sledge moved away, she calmed down, her livid face assumed its copper colour, and her eyes became dull. She fell back into her old apathy.

'She 's forgotten all about it,' said one of her companions.

'These lunatics are often happier than other people,' answered the friend. Then they walked on in silence. Nothing was heard but the creaking snow under their feet.

CHAPTER X

The loss of his horses had almost driven Slimak crazy. Beating Maciek and kicking him out had not exhausted his anger. He felt the room oppressive, walked out into the yard and ran up and down with clenched fists and bloodshot eyes, waiting for a chance to vent his temper.

He remembered that he ought to feed the cows and went into the stable, where he pushed the animals about, and when one clumsily trod on his foot, he seized a fork and beat her mercilessly. He kicked Burek's body behind the barn. 'You damned dog, if you had not taken bread from strangers, I should still have my horses!'

He returned to the room and threw himself on the bench with such violence that he upset the block for wood-chopping. Jendrek laughed, but his father unbuckled his belt and did not stop beating him till the boy crept, bleeding, under the bench. With the belt in his hand Slimak waited for his wife to make a remark. But she remained silent, only holding on to the chimney-piece for support.

'What makes you stagger? Haven't you got over yesterday's vodka?'

'Something 's wrong with me,' she answered low.

He decided to strap on his belt. 'What 's wrong?'

'I can't see, and there 's a noise in my ears. Is any one whistling?'

'Don't drink vodka and you'll hear no noises,' he said, spitting, and went out. It surprised him that she had made no remark after the thrashing he had given Jendrek, and having no one to beat, he seized an axe and chopped wood until nightfall, eating nothing all day. Logs and splinters fell round him, he felt as if he were revenging himself on his enemies, and when he left off, stiff and tired, his shirt soaked with perspiration, his anger had gone from him.

He was surprised to find no one in the room and peeped into the alcove; Slimakowa was lying on the bed.

'What 's the matter?'

'I'm not well, but it 's nothing.'

'The fire has gone out.'

'Out?' she asked vaguely, raising herself. She got up and lighted the fire with difficulty, her husband watching her.

'You see,' he said presently, 'you got hot yesterday and then you would drink water out of the Jew's pewter pot and unbutton your jacket. You have caught cold.'

'It 's nothing,' she said ill-humouredly, pulled herself together and warmed up the supper. Jendrek crept out and took a spoon, but cried instead of eating.

During the night, at about the hour when the unhappy Maciek was drawing his last breath in the ravines, Slimakowa was seized with violent fits of shivering. Slimak covered her with his sheepskin and it passed off. She got up in the morning, and although she complained of pains, she went about her work. Slimak was depressed.

Towards evening a sledge stopped at the gate and the innkeeper Josel entered with a strange expression on his face. Slimak's conscience pricked him.

'The Lord be praised,' said Josel.

'In Eternity.'

A silence ensued.

'You have nothing to ask?' said the Jew.

'What should I have to ask?' Slimak looked into his eyes and involuntarily grew pale.

'To-morrow,' Josel said slowly, 'to-morrow Jendrek's trial is coming on for violence to Hermann.'

'They'll do nothing to him.'

'I expect he will have to sit in jail for a bit.'

'Then let him sit, it will cure him of fighting.'

Again silence fell. The Jew shook his head; Slimak's alarm grew.

He screwed up his courage at last and asked: 'What else?'

'What 's the use of making many words ? ' said the Jew, holding up his hands, 'Maciek and the child have been frozen to death.'

Slimak sprang to his feet and looked for something to throw at the Jew, but staggered and held on to the wall. A hot wave rushed over him, his legs shook. Then he wondered why he should have been seized with fear like this.

'Where . . . when ? '

'In the ravines close to the railway line.'

'But when ? '

'You know quite well that it was yesterday when you drove them out.' Slimak's anger was rising.

'As I live ! the Jew is a liar ! Frozen to death ? What did he go to the ravines for ? are there no cottages in the world ? '

The innkeeper shrugged his shoulders and got up.

'You can believe it or not, it 's all the same to me, but I myself saw them being driven to the police-station.'

'Ah well ! What harm can they do to me, because Maciek has been frozen ? '

'Perhaps men can't do you harm, but, man, before God ! or don't you believe in God ? ' the Jew asked from the other side of the door, his burning eyes fixed on Slimak.

The peasant stood still and listened to his heavy tread down to the gate and to the sound of his departing sledge. He shook himself, turned round and met Jendrek's eyes looking fixedly at him from the far corner.

'Why should I be to blame ? ' he muttered. Suddenly an annual sermon, preached by an old

priest, flashed through his mind; he seemed to hear the peculiar cadence of his voice as he said: 'I was an hungered and ye gave me no meat. . . . I was a stranger and ye took me not in.'

'By God, the Jew is lying,' he exclaimed. These words seemed to break the spell; he felt sure Maciek and the child were alive, and he almost went out to call them in to supper.

'A low Jew, that Josel,' he said to his wife, while he covered her again with the sheepskin, when her shivering-fits returned. Nothing should induce him to believe that story.

Next day the village Soltys drove up with the summons for Jendrek.

'His trial does not come on till to-morrow,' he said, 'but as I was driving that way, I thought he might as well come with me.'

Jendrek grew pale and silently put on his new sukmana and sheepskin.

'What will they do to him?' his father asked peevishly.

'Eh! I dare say he'll get a few days, perhaps a week.'

Slimak slowly pulled a rouble out of a little packet.

'And . . . Soltys, have you heard what the accursed Jew has been saying about Maciek and the child being frozen to death?'

'How shouldn't I have heard?' said the Soltys, reluctantly; 'it 's true.'

'Frozen . . . frozen?'

'Yes, of course. But,' he added, 'every one understands that it 's not your fault. He didn't look after the horses and you discharged him. No one told him to go down into the ravines.

He must have been drunk. The poor wretch died through his own stupidity.'

Jendrek was ready to start, and embraced his parents' knees. Slimak gave him the rouble, tears came into his eyes; his mother, however, showed no sign of interest.

'Jagna,' Slimak said with concern, 'Jendrek is going to his trial.'

'What of that?' she answered with a delirious look.

'Are you very ill?'

'No, I'm only weak.'

She went into the alcove and Slimak remained alone. The longer he sat pondering the lower his head dropped on to his chest. Half dozing, he fancied he was sitting on a wide, grey plain, no bushes, no grass, not even stones were to be seen; there was nothing in front of him; but at his side there was something he dared not look at. It was Maciek with the child looking steadily at him.

No, he would not look, he need not look! He need see nothing of him, except a little bit of his sukmana . . . perhaps not even that!

The thought of Maciek was becoming an obsession. He got up and began to busy himself with the dishes.

'What am I coming to? It doesn't do to give way!'

He pulled himself together, fed the cattle, ran to the river for water. It was so long since he had done these things that he felt rejuvenated, and but for the thought of Maciek he would have been almost cheerful.

His gloom returned with the dusk. It was the silence that tormented him most. Nothing

stirred but the mice behind the boards. The voice was haunting him again : ' I was a stranger and ye took me not in.'

' It 's all the fault of those scoundrel Swabians that everything is going wrong with me,' he muttered, and began to count his losses on the window-pane : ' Stasiek, that 's one, the cow two, the horses four, because the thieves did that out of spite for the hog, Burek five, Jendrek six, Maciek and the child eight, and Magda had to leave, and my wife is ill with worry, that makes ten. Lord Christ . . . ! '

Trembling seized him and he gripped his hair ; he had never in his life felt fear like this, though he had looked death in the face more than once. He had suddenly caught a glimpse of the power the Germans were exercising, and it scared him. They had destroyed all his life's work, and yet you could not bring it home to them. They had lived like others, ploughed, prayed, taught their children ; you could not say they were doing any wrong, and yet they had made his home desolate simply by being there. They had blasted what was near them as smoke from a kiln withers all green things.

Not until this moment had the thought ever come to him : ' I am too close to them ! The gospodarstwos farther off do not suffer like this. What good is the land, if the people on it die ? '

This new aspect was so horrible to him, that he felt he must escape from it ; he glanced at his wife, she was asleep. The cadence of the priest's voice began to haunt him again.

Steps were approaching through the yard. The peasant straightened himself. Could it be Jendrek? The door creaked. No, it was a strange hand that

groped along the wall in the darkness. He drew back, and his head swam when the door opened and Zoska stood on the threshold.

For a moment both stood silent, then Zoska said: 'Be praised.'

She began rubbing her hands over the fire.

The idea of Maciek and the child and Zoska had become confused in Slimak's mind; he looked at her as if she were an apparition from the other world. 'Where do you come from?' His voice was choked.

'They sent me back to the parish and told me to look out for work. They said they wouldn't keep loafers.'

Seeing the food in the saucepan, she began to lick her lips like a dog.

'Pour out a basin of soup for yourself.'

She did as she was told.

'Don't you want a servant?' she asked presently.

'I don't know; my wife is ill.'

'There you are! It 's quiet here. Where 's Magda?'

'Left.'

'Jendrek?'

'Sent up for trial.'

'There you are! Stasiek?'

'Drowned last summer,' he whispered, fearful lest Maciek's and the little girl's turn should come next.

But she ate greedily like a wild animal, and asked nothing further.

'Does she know?' he thought.

Zoska had finished and struck her hand cheerfully on her knee. He took courage.

'Can I stop the night?'

Uneasiness seized him; any other guest would have been a blessing in his solitude, but Zoska. . . . If she did not know the truth, what ill wind had blown her here? And if she knew? . . .'

He reflected. In the intense silence suddenly the priest's voice started again: 'I was a stranger and ye took me not in.'

'All right, stop here, but you must sleep in this room.'

'Or in the barn?'

'No, here.'

He hardly knew what it was that he feared; there was a vague sense of misfortune in the air which was tormenting him.

The fire died down. Zoska lay down on the bench in her rags and Slimak went into the alcove. He sat on the bed, determined to be on the watch. He did not know that this strange state of mind is called 'nerves'. Yet a kind of relief had come in with Zoska; she had driven away the spectre of Maciek and the child. But an iron ring was beginning to press on his head. This was sleep, heavy sleep, the companion of great anguish. He dreamt that he was split in two; one part of him was sitting by his sick wife, the other was Maciek, standing outside the window, where sunflowers bloomed in the summer. This new Maciek was unlike the old one, he was gloomy and vindictive.

'Don't believe,' said the strange guest, 'that I shall forgive you. It's not so much that I got frozen, that might happen to anyone the worse for drink, but you drove me away for no fault of mine after I had served you so long. And what harm had the child done to you? Don't turn away! Pass

judgement on yourself for what you have done. God will not let these wrongs be done and keep silent.'

'What shall I say ? ' thought Slimak, bathed in perspiration. ' He is telling the truth, I am a scoundrel. He shall fix the punishment, perhaps he will get it over quickly.'

His wife moved and he opened his eyes, but closed them again. A rosy brightness filled the room, the frost glittered in flowers on the window panes. ' Daylight ? ' he thought.

No, it was not daylight, the rosy brightness trembled. A smell of burning was heavy in the room.

' Fire ? '

He looked into the room ; Zoska had disappeared.

' I knew it ! ' he exclaimed, and ran out into the yard.

His house was indeed on fire ; the roof towards the highroad was alight, but owing to the thick layers of snow the flames spread but slowly ; he could still have saved the house, but he did not even think of this.

' Get up, Jagna,' he cried, running back into the alcove, ' the house is on fire ! '

' Leave me alone,' said the delirious woman, covering her head with the sheepskin. He seized her and, stumbling over the threshold, carried her into the shed, fetched her clothes and bedding, broke open the chest and took out his money ; finally he threw everything he could lay hands on out of the window. Here was at least something tangible to fight. The whole roof was now ablaze ; smoke and flames were coming into the room from

the boarded ceiling. He was dragging the bench through the brightly illuminated yard when he happened to look at the barn ; he stood petrified. Flames were licking at it, and there stood Zoska shaking her clenched fist at him and shouting : ' That 's my thanks to you, Slimak, for taking care of my child, now you shall die as she did ! '

She flew out of the yard and up the hill ; he could see her by the light of the fire, dancing and clapping her hands.

' Fire, fire ! ' she shouted.

Slimak reeled like a wild animal after the first shot. Then he slowly went towards the barn and sat down, not thinking of seeking help. This was the beginning of the divine punishment for the wrong he had done.

' We shall all die ! ' he murmured.

Both buildings were burning like pillars of fire, and in spite of the frost Slimak felt hot in the shed. Suddenly shouts and clattering came from the settlement ; the Germans were coming to his assistance. Soon the yard was swarming with them, men, women and children with hand-fire-engines and buckets. They formed into groups, and at Fritz Hamer's command began to pull down the burning masses and to put out the fire. Laughing and emulating each other in daring, they went into the fire as into a dance ; some of the most venturesome climbed up the walls of the burning buildings. Zoska approached once more from the side of the ravines.

' Never mind the Germans helping you, you will die all the same,' she cried.

' Who is that ? ' shouted the settlers,' catch her ! '

But Zoska was too quick for them.

'I suppose it was she who set fire to your house?' asked Fritz.

'No one else but she.'

Fritz was silent for a moment.

'It would be better for you to sell us the land.'

The peasant hung his head. . . .

The barn could not be saved, but the walls of the cottage were still standing; some of the people were busy putting out the fire, others surrounded the sick woman.

'What are you going to do?' Fritz began again.

'We will live in the stable.'

The women whispered that they had better be taken to the settlement, but the men shook their heads, saying the woman might be infectious. Fritz inclined to this opinion and ordered her to be well wrapped up and taken into the stable.

'We will send you what you need,' he said.

'God reward you,' said Slimak, embracing his knees.

Fritz took Hermann aside.

'Drive full speed to Wolka,' he said, 'and fetch miller Knap; we may be able to settle this affair to-night.'

'It 's high time we did,' replied the other, audibly, 'we shan't hold out till the spring unless we do.'

Fritz swore.

Nevertheless, he took leave benevolently. Bending over the sick woman he said: 'She is quite unconscious.'

But in a strangely decided voice she ejaculated: 'Ah! unconscious!'

He drew back in confusion. 'She is delirious,' he said.

At daybreak the Germans brought the promised help, but Slimak paced backwards and forwards among the ruins of his homestead, from which the smell of smouldering embers rose pungently. He looked at his household goods, tumbled into the yard. How many times had he sat on that bench and cut notches and crosses into it when a boy. That heap of smouldering ruins represented his storehouse and the year's crop. How small the cottage looked now that it was reduced to walls, and how large the chimney! He took out his money, hid it under a heap of dry manure in the stable and strolled about again. Up the hill he went, with a feeling that they were talking about him in the village and would come to his help. But there was no one to be seen on the boundless covering of snow; here and there smoke rose from the cottages.

His imagination, keener than usual, conjured up old pictures. He fancied he was harrowing on the hill with the two chestnuts who were whisking their tails under his nose; the sparrows were twittering, Stasiek gazing into the river; by the bridge his wife was beating the linen, he could hear the resounding smacks, while the squire's brother-in-law was wildly galloping up and down the valley. Jendrek and Magda were answering each other in snatches of songs. . . .

Suddenly he was awakened from his dreams by the stench of his burnt cottage; he looked up, and everything he saw became abominable to him. The frozen river, into which his child would never gaze again; the empty, hideous homestead; he longed to escape from it all and go far away and forget Stasiek and Maciek and the whole accursed

gospodarstwo. He could buy land more cheaply elsewhere with the money he would get from the Germans. What was the good of the land if it was ruining the people on it ?

He went into the stable and lay down near his wife, who was moaning deliriously, and soon fell asleep.

At noon old Hamer appeared, accompanied by a German woman who carried two bowls of hot soup. He stood over Slimak and poked him with his stick.

' Hey, get up ! '

Slimak roused himself and looked about heavily ; seeing the hot food he ate greedily. Hamer sat down in the doorway, smoking his pipe and watching Slimak ; he nodded contentedly to himself.

' I've been down to the village to ask Gryb and the other gospodarze to come and help you, for that is a Christian duty. . . . '

He waited for the peasant's thanks, but Slimak went on eating and did not look at him.

' I told them they ought to take you in ; but they said, God was punishing you for the death of the labourer and the child and they didn't wish to interfere. They are no Christians.'

Slimak had finished eating, but he remained silent.

' Well, what are you going to do ? '

Slimak wiped his mouth and said : ' I shall sell.'

Hamer poked his pipe with deliberation.

' To whom ? '

' To you.'

Hamer again busied himself with his pipe. ' All right ! I am willing to buy, as you have fallen

upon bad times. But I can only give you seventy roubles.'

'You were giving a hundred not long ago.'

'Why didn't you take it?'

'That 's true, why didn't I take it? Everyone profits as he can.'

'Have you never tried to profit?'

'I have.'

'Then will you take it?'

'Why shouldn't I take it?'

'We will settle the matter at my house to-night.'

'The sooner the better.'

'Well, since it is so,' Hamer added after a while, 'I will give you seventy-five roubles, and you shan't be left to die here. You and your wife can come to the school; you can spend the winter with us and I will give you the same pay as my own farm-labourers.'

Slimak winced at the word 'farm-labourer', but he said nothing.

'And your gospodarze,' concluded Hamer, 'are brutes. They will do nothing for you.'

Before sunset a sledge conveyed the unconscious woman to the settlement. Slimak remained, recovered his money from under the manure, collected a few possessions and milked the cows.

The dumb animals looked reproachfully at him and seemed to ask: 'Are you sure you have done the best you could, gospodarz?'

'What am I to do?' he returned, 'the place is unlucky, it is bewitched. Perhaps the Germans can take the spell away, I can't.'

He felt as if his feet were being held to the ground, but he spat at it. 'Much I have to be thankful to you for! Barren land, far from everybody so

that thieves may profit!' He would not look back.

On the way he met two German farm-labourers, who had come to spend the night in the stable; as he passed them, they laughed.

'Catch me spending the winter with you scoundrels! I'm off directly the wife is well and the boy out of jail.'

A black shadow detached itself from the gate when he reached the settlement. 'Is that you, schoolmaster?'

'Yes. So you have consented after all to sell your land?'

Slimak was silent.

'Perhaps it 's the best thing you can do. If you can't make much of it yourself, at least you can save others.' He looked round and lowered his voice. 'But mind you bargain well, for you are doing them a good turn. Miller Knap will pay cash down as soon as the contract has been signed and give his daughter to Wilhelm. Otherwise Hirschgold will turn the Hamers out at midsummer and sell the land to Gryb. They have a heavy contract with the Jew.'

'What? Gryb would buy the settlement?'

'Indeed he would. He is anxious to settle his son too, and Josel has been sniffing round for a month past. So there 's your chance, bargain well.'

'Why, damn it,' said Slimak, 'I would rather have a hundred Germans than that old Judas.'

A door creaked and the schoolmaster changed the conversation. 'Come this way, your wife is in the schoolroom.'

'Is that Slimak?' Fritz called out.

'It is I.'

'Don't stay long with your wife, she is being looked after, and we want you at daybreak; you must sleep in the kitchen.'

The noise of loud conversation and clinking of glasses came from the back of the house, but the large schoolroom was empty, and only lighted by a small lamp. His wife was lying on a plank bed; a pungent smell of vinegar pervaded the room. That smell took the heart out of Slimak; surely his wife must be very ill! He stood over her; her eye-lashes twitched and she looked steadily at him.

'Is it you, Josef?'

'Who else should it be?'

Her hands moved about restlessly on the sheepskin; she said distinctly: 'What are you doing, Josef, what are you doing?'

'You see I am standing here.'

'Ah yes, you are standing there . . . but what are you doing? I know everything, never fear!'

'Go away, gospodarz,' hurriedly cried the old woman, pushing him towards the door, 'she is getting excited, it isn't good for her.'

'Josef!' cried Slimakowa, 'come back! Josef, I must speak to you!' The peasant hesitated.

'You are doing no good,' whispered the schoolmaster, 'she is rambling, she may go to sleep when you are out of sight.'

He drew Slimak into the passage, and Fritz Hamer at once took him to the further room.

Miller Knap and old Hamer were sitting at a brightly lighted table behind their beer mugs, blowing clouds of smoke from their pipes. The miller had the appearance of a huge sack of flour as he sat there in his shirtsleeves, holding a full pot of beer in his hand and wiping the perspira-

tion off his forehead. Gold studs glittered in his shirt.

'Well, you are going to let us have your land at last?' he shouted.

'I don't know,' said the peasant in a low voice, 'maybe I shall sell it.' The miller roared with laughter.

'Wilhelm,' he bellowed, as if Wilhelm, who was officiating at the beer-barrel on the bench, were half a mile off, 'pour out some beer for this man. Drink to my health and I'll drink to yours, although you never used to bring me your corn to grind. But why didn't you sell us your land before?'

'I don't know,' said the peasant, taking a long pull.

'Fill up his glass,' shouted the miller, 'I will tell you why; it 's because you don't know your own mind. Determination is what you want. I've said to myself: I will have a mill at Wolka, and a mill at Wolka I have, although the Jews twice set fire to it. I said: My son shall be a doctor, and a doctor he will be. And now I've said: Hamer, your son must have a windmill, so he must have a windmill. Pour out another glass, Wilhelm, good beer . . . eh? my son-in-law brews it. What? no more beer? Then we'll go to bed.'

Fritz pushed Slimak into the kitchen, where one of the farm-hands was asleep already. He felt stupefied; whether it was with the beer or with Knap's noisy conversation, he could not tell. He sat down on his plank bed and felt cheerful. The noise of conversation in German reached him from the adjoining room; then the Hamers left the house. Miller Knap stamped about the room for a while; presently his thick voice repeated the

Lord's prayer while he was pulling off his boots and throwing them into a corner : ' Amen amen,' he concluded, and flung himself heavily upon the bed ; a few moments later noises as if he were being throttled and murdered proclaimed that he was asleep.

The moon was throwing a feeble light through the small squares of the window.

Between waking and sleeping Slimak continued to meditate : ' Why shouldn't I sell ? It 's better to buy fifteen acres of land elsewhere, than to stay and have Jasiek Gryb as a neighbour. The sooner I sell, the better.' He got up as if he wished to settle the matter at once, laughed quietly to himself and felt more and more intoxicated.

Then he saw a human shadow outlined against the window pane ; someone was trying to look into the room. The peasant approached the window and became sober. He ran into the passage and pulled the door open with trembling hands. Frosty air fanned his face. His wife was standing outside, still trying to look through the window.

' Jagna, for God's sake, what are you doing here ? Who dressed you ? '

' I dressed myself, but I couldn't manage my boots, they are quite crooked. Come home,' she said, drawing him by the hand.

' Where, home ? Are you so ill that you don't know our home is burnt down ? Where will you go on a bitter night like this ? '

Hamer's mastiffs were beginning to growl. Slimakowa hung on her husband's arm. ' Come home, come home,' she urged stubbornly, ' I will not die in a strange house, I am a gospodyni, I will

not stay here with the Swabians. The priests would not even sprinkle holy water on my coffin.'

She pulled him and he went; the dogs went after them for a while snapping at their clothes; they made straight for the frozen river, so as to reach their own nest the sooner. On the river bank they stopped for a moment, the tired woman was out of breath.

'You have let yourself be tempted by the Germans to sell them your land! You think I don't know. Perhaps you will say it is not true?' she cried, looking wildly into his eyes. He hung his head.

'You traitor, you son of a dog!' she burst out. 'Sell your land! You would sell the Lord Jesus to the Jews! Tired of being a gospodarz, are you? What is Jendrek to do? And is a gospodyni to die in a stranger's house?'

She drew him into the middle of the frozen river.

'Stand here, Judas,' she cried, seizing him by the hands. 'Will you sell your land? Listen! Sell it, and God will curse you and the boy. This ice shall break if you don't give up that devil's thought! I won't give you peace after death, you shall never sleep! When you close your eyes I will come and open them again . . . listen!' she cried in a paroxysm of rage, 'if you sell the land, you shall not swallow the holy sacrament, it shall turn to blood in your mouth.'

'Jesus!' whispered the man.

'. . . Where you tread, the grass shall be blasted! You shall throw a spell on everyone you look at, and misfortune shall befall them.'

'Jesus . . . Jesus!' he groaned, tearing himself from her and stopping his ears.

'Will you sell the land?' she cried, with her face close to his. He shook his head. 'Not if you have to draw your last breath lying on filthy litter?'

'Not though I had to draw . . . so help me God!'

The woman was staggering; her husband carried her to the other bank and reached the stable, where the two farm labourers were installed.

'Open the door!' He hammered until one of them appeared.

'Clear out! I am going to put my wife in here.'

They demurred and he kicked them both out. They went off, cursing and threatening him.

Slimak laid his wife down on the warm litter and strolled about the yard, thinking that he must presently fetch help for her and a doctor. Now and then he looked into the stable; she seemed to be sleeping quietly. Her great peacefulness began to strike him, his head was swimming, he heard noises in his ears; he knelt down and pulled her by the hand: she was dead, even cold.

'Now I don't care if I go to the devil,' he said, raked some straw into a corner and was asleep within a few minutes.

It was afternoon when he was at last awakened by old Sobieska.

'Get up, Slimak! your wife is dead! God's faith! dead as a stone.'

'How can I help it?' said the peasant, turning over and drawing his sheepskin over his head.

'But you must buy a coffin and notify the parish.'

'Let anyone who cares do that.'

'Who will do it? In the village they say it 's God's punishment on you. And won't the Germans take it out of you! That fat man has quarrelled

with them. Josel says you are now reaping the benefit of selling your fowls: he threatened me if I came here to see you. Get up now!'

'Let me be or I'll kick you!'

'You godless man, is your wife to lie there without Christian burial?' He advanced his boot so vehemently that the old woman ran screaming out along the highroad.

Slimak pushed to the door and lay down again. A hard peasant-stubbornness had seized him. He was certain that he was past salvation. He neither accused himself nor regretted anything; he only wanted to be left to sleep eternally. Divine pity could have saved him, but he no longer believed in divine pity, and no human hand would do so much as give him a cup of water.

While the sound of the evening-bells floated through the air, and the women in the cottages whispered the Angelus, a bent figure approached the gospodarstwo, a sack on his back, a stick in his hand; the glory of the setting sun surrounded him. Such as these are the 'angels' which the Lord sends to people in the extremity of their sorrow.

It was Jonah Niedoperz, the oldest and poorest Jew in the neighbourhood; he traded in everything and never had any money to keep his large family, with whom he lived in a half-ruined cottage with broken windowpanes. Jonah was on his way to the village and was meditating deeply. Would he get a job there? would he live to have a dinner of pike on the Sabbath? would his little grandchildren ever have two shirts to their backs?

'Ajwaj!' he muttered, 'and they even took the

three roubles from me!' He had never forgotten that robbery in the autumn, for it was the largest sum he had ever possessed.

His glance fell on the burnt homestead. Good God! if such a thing should ever befall the cottage where his wife and daughters, sons-in-law and grandchildren lived! His emotion grew when he heard the cows lowing miserably. He approached the stable.

'Slimak! My good lady gospodyni!' he cried, tapping at the door. He was afraid to open it lest he should be suspected of prying into other people's business.

'Who is that?' asked Slimak.

'It 's only I, old Jonah,' he said, and peeped in, 'but what 's wrong with your honours?' he asked in astonishment.

'My wife is dead.'

'Dead? how dead? what do you mean by such a joke? Ajwaj! really dead?' He looked attentively at her.

'Such a good gospodyni . . . what a misfortune, God defend us! And you are lying there and don't see about the funeral?'

'There may as well be two,' murmured the peasant.

'How two? are you ill?'

'No.'

The Jew shook his head and spat. 'It can't be like this; if you won't move I will go and give notice; tell me what to do.'

Slimak did not answer. The cows began to low again.

'What is the matter with the cows?' the Jew asked interestedly.

'I suppose they want water.'

'Then why don't you water them?'

No answer came. The Jew looked at Slimak and waited, then he tapped his forehead. 'Where is the pail, gospodarz?'

'Leave me alone.'

But Jonah did not give in. He found the pail, ran to the ice-hole and watered the cows; he had sympathy for cows, because he dreamt of possessing one himself one day, or at least a goat. Then he put the pail close to Slimak. He was exhausted with this unusually hard work.

'Well, gospodarz, what is to happen now?'

His pity touched Slimak, but failed to rouse him. He raised his head. 'If you should see Grochowski, tell him not to sell the land before Jendrek is of age.'

'But what am I to do now, when I get to the village?'

Slimak had relapsed into silence.

The Jew rested his chin in his hand and pondered for a while; at last he took his bundle and stick and went off. The miserable old man's pity was so strong that he forgot his own needs and only thought of saving the other. Indeed, he was unable to distinguish between himself and his fellow-creature, and he felt as if he himself were lying on the straw beside his dead wife and must rouse himself at all costs.

He went as fast as his old legs would carry him straight to Grochowski; by the time he arrived it was dark. He knocked, but received no answer, waited for a quarter of an hour and then walked round the house. Despairing at last of making himself heard, he was just going to depart, when

Grochowski suddenly confronted him, as if the ground had produced him.

'What do you want, Jew?' asked the huge man, concealing some long object behind his back.

'What do I want?' quavered the frightened Jew, 'I have come straight from Slimak's. Do you know that his house is burnt down, his wife is dead, and he is lying beside her, out of his wits? He talks as if he had a filthy idea in his head, and he hasn't even watered the cows.'

'Listen, Jew,' said Grochowski fiercely, 'who told you to come here and lie to me? is it those horse-stealers?'

'What horse-stealers? I've come straight from Slimak. . . .'

'Lies! You won't draw me away from here, whatever you do.'

The Jew now perceived that it was a gun which Grochowski was hiding behind his back, and the sight so unnerved him that he nearly fell down. He fled at full speed along the highroad. Even now, however, he did not forget Slimak, but walked on towards the village to find the priest.

The priest had been in the parish for several years. He was middle-aged and extremely good-looking, and possessed the education and manners of a nobleman. He read more than any of his neighbours, hunted, was sociable, and kept bees. Everybody spoke well of him, the nobility because he was clever and fond of society, the Jews because he would not allow them to be oppressed, the settlers because he entertained their Pastors, the peasants because he renovated the church, conducted the services with much pomp, preached beautiful sermons, and gave to the poor. But in

spite of this there was no intimate touch between him and his simple parishioners. When they thought of him, they felt that God was a great nobleman, benevolent and merciful, but not friends with the first comer. The priest felt this and regretted it. No peasant had ever invited him to a wedding or christening. At first he had tried to break through their shyness, and had entered into conversations with them; but these ended in embarrassment on both sides and he left it off. 'I cannot act the democrat,' he thought irritably.

Sometimes when he had been left to himself for several days owing to bad roads, he had pricks of conscience.

'I am a Pharisee,' he thought; 'I did not become a priest only to associate with the nobility, but to serve the humble.'

He would then lock himself in, pray for the apostolic spirit, vow to give away his spaniel and empty his cellar of wine.

But as a rule, just as the spirit of humility and renunciation was beginning to be awakened, Satan would send him a visitor.

'God have mercy! fate is against me,' he would mutter, get up from his knees, give orders for the kitchen and cellar, and sing jolly songs and drink like an Uhlan a quarter of an hour afterwards.

To-night, at the time when Jonah was drawing near to the Parsonage, he was getting ready for a party at a neighbouring landowner's to meet an engineer from Warsaw who would have the latest news and be entertained exceptionally well, for he was courting the landowner's daughter. The priest was longing feverishly for the moment of

departure, for he had been left to himself for several days. He could hardly bear the look of his snow-covered courtyard any more, having no diversion except watching a man chop wood, and hearing the cawing of rooks. He paced to and fro, thinking that another quarter of an hour must have gone, and was surprised to find it was only a few minutes since he had last looked at his watch. He ordered the samovar and lit his pipe. Then there was a knock at the door. Jonah came in, bowing to the ground.

'I am glad to see you,' said the priest, 'there are several things in my wardrobe that want mending.'

'God be praised for that, I haven't had work for a week past. And your honour's lady housekeeper tells me that the clock is broken as well.'

'What? you mend clocks too?'

'Why yes, I've even got the tools to do it with. I'm also an umbrella-mender and harness-maker, and I can glaze stewing-pans.'

'If that is so you might spend the winter here. When can you begin?'

'I'll sit down now and work through the night.'

'As you like. Ask them to give you some tea in the kitchen.'

'Begging your Reverence's pardon, may I ask that the sugar might be served separately?'

'Don't you like your tea sweet?'

'On the contrary, I like it very sweet. But I save the sugar for my grandchildren.'

The priest laughed at the Jew's astuteness. 'All right! have your tea with sugar and some for your grandchildren as well. Walenty!' he called out, 'bring me my fur coat.'

The Jew began bowing afresh. 'With an entreaty for your Reverence's pardon, I come from Slimak's.'

'The man whose house was burnt down?'

'Not that he asked me to come, your Reverence, he would not presume to do such a thing, but his wife is dead, they are both lying in the stable, and I am sure he has a bad thought in his head, for no one does so much as give him a cup of water.' The priest started.

'No one has visited him?'

'Begging your Reverence's pardon,' bowed the Jew, 'but they say in the village, God's anger has fallen on him, so he must die without help.' He looked into the priest's eyes as if Slimak's salvation depended on him. His Reverence knocked his pipe on the floor till it broke.

'Then I'll go into the kitchen,' said the Jew, and took up his bundle. The sledge-bells tinkled at the door, the valet stood ready with the fur coat.

'I shall be wanted for the betrothal,' reflected the priest, 'that man will last till to-morrow, and I can't bring the dead woman back to life. It 's eight o'clock, if I go to the man first there will be nothing to go for afterwards. Give me my fur coat, Walenty.' He went into his bedroom: 'Are the horses ready? Is it a bright night?'

'Quite bright, your Reverence.'

'I cannot be the slave of all the people who are burnt down and all the women who die,' he agitatedly resumed his thoughts, 'it will be time enough to-morrow, and anyhow the man can't be worth much if no one will help him.' . . . His eyes fell on the crucifix. 'Divine wounds! Here I am hesitating between my amusement and comforting the stricken, and I am a priest and a citizen!

Get a basket,' he said in a changed voice to the astonished servant, ' put the rest of the dinner into it. I had better take the sacrament too,' he thought, after the surprised man had left the room, ' perhaps he is dying. God is giving me another spell of grace instead of condemning me eternally.'

He struck his breast and forgot that God does not count the number of amusements preferred and bottles emptied, but the greatness of the struggle in each human heart.

CHAPTER XI

Within half an hour the priest's round ponies stood at Slimak's gate. The priest walked towards the stable with a lantern in one hand and a basket in the other, pushed open the door with his foot, and saw Slimakowa's body. Further away, on the litter, sat the peasant, shading his eyes from the light.

' Who is that ? ' he asked.

' It is I, your priest.'

Slimak sprang to his feet, with deep astonishment on his face. He advanced with unsteady steps to the threshold, and gazed at the priest with open mouth.

' What have you come for, your Reverence ? '

' I have come to bring you the divine blessing. Put on your sheepskin, it is cold here. Have something to eat.' He unpacked the basket.

Slimak stared, touched the priest's sleeve, and suddenly fell sobbing at his feet.

'I am wretched, your Reverence . . . I am wretched . . . wretched!'

'Benedicat te omnipotens Deus!' Instead of making the sign of the cross, the priest put his arm round the peasant and drew him on to the threshold.

'Calm yourself, brother, all will be well. God does not forsake His children.'

He kissed him and wiped his tears. With almost a howl the peasant threw himself at his feet.

'Now I don't mind if I die, or if I go to hell for my sins! I've had this consolation that your Reverence has taken pity on me. If I were to go to the Holy City on my knees, it would not be enough to repay you for your kindness.'

He touched the ground at the priest's feet as though it were the altar. The priest had to use much persuasion before he put on his sheepskin and consented to touch food.

'Take a good pull,' he said, pouring out the mead.

'I dare not, your Reverence.'

'Well, then I will drink to you.' He touched the glass with his lips.

The peasant took the glass with trembling hands and drank kneeling, swallowing with difficulty.

'Don't you like it?'

'Like it? vodka is nothing compared to this!' Slimak's voice sounded natural again. 'Isn't it just full of spice!' he added, and revived rapidly.

'Now tell me all about it,' began the priest: 'I remember you as a prosperous gospodarz.'

'It would be a long story to tell your Reverence. One of my sons was drowned, the other is in jail; my wife is dead, my horses were stolen, my house burnt down. It all began with the squire's selling

the village, and with the railway and the Germans coming here. Then Josel set everyone against me, because I had been selling fowls and other things to the surveyors; even now he is doing his best to . . .'

'But why does everyone go to Josel for advice?' interrupted the priest.

'To whom is one to go, begging your Reverence's pardon? We peasants are ignorant people. The Jews know about everything, and sometimes they give good advice.'

The priest winced. The peasant continued excitedly:

'There were no wages coming in from the manor, and the Germans took the two acres I had rented from the squire.'

'But let me see,' said the priest, 'wasn't it you to whom the squire offered those two acres at a great deal less than they were worth?'

'Certainly it was me!'

'Why didn't you take the offer? I suppose you did not trust him?'

'How can one trust them when one does not know what they are talking among themselves; they jabber like Jews, and when they talked to me they were poking fun at me. Besides, there was some talk of free distribution of land.'

'And you believed that?'

'Why should I not believe it? A man likes to believe what is to his advantage. The Jews knew it wasn't true, but they won't tell.'

'Why didn't you apply for work at the railway?

'I did, but the Germans kept me out.'

'Why couldn't you have come to me? the chief engineer was living at my house all the time,' said the priest, getting angry.

'I beg your Reverence's pardon; I couldn't have known that, and I shouldn't have dared to apply to your Reverence.'

'Hm! And the Germans annoyed you?'

'Oh dear, oh dear! haven't they been pestering me to sell them my land all along, and when the fire came I gave way. . . .'

'And you sold them the land?'

'God and my dead wife saved me from doing that. She got up from her deathbed and laid a curse upon me if I should sell the land. I would rather die than sell it, but all the same,' he hung his head, 'the Germans will pay me out.'

'I don't think they can do you much harm.'

'If the Germans leave,' continued the peasant, 'I shall be up against old Gryb, and he will do me as much harm as the Germans, or more.'

'I am a good shepherd!' the priest reflected bitterly. 'My sheep are fighting each other like wolves, go to the Jews for advice, are persecuted by the Germans, and I am going to entertainments!'

He got up. 'Stay here, my brother,' he said, 'I will go to the village.'

Slimak kissed his feet and accompanied him to the sledge.

'Drive across to the village,' he directed his coachman.

'To the village?' The coachman's face, which was so chubby that it looked as if it had been stung by bees, was comic in its astonishment: 'I thought we were going . . .'

'Drive where I tell you!'

Slimak leant on the fence, as in happier days.

'How could he have known about me?' he

reflected. 'Is a priest like God who knows everything? They would not have brought him word from the village. It must have been good old Jonah. But now they will not dare to look askance at me, because his Reverence himself has come to see me. If he could only take the sin of my sending Maciek and the child to their death from me, I shouldn't be afraid of anything.'

Presently the priest returned.

'Are you there, Slimak?' he called out. 'Gryb will come to you to-morrow. Make it up with him and don't quarrel any more. I have sent to town for a coffin and am arranging for the funeral.'

'Oh Redeemer!' sighed Slimak.

'Now, Pawel! drive on as fast as the horses will go,' cried the priest. He pulled out his repeater watch: it was a quarter to ten.

'I shall be late,' he murmured, 'but not too late for everything; there will be time for some fun yet.'

As soon as the sledge had melted into the darkness, and silence again brooded over his home, an irresistible desire for sleep seized Slimak. He dragged himself to the stable, but he hesitated. He did not wish to lie down once more by the side of his dead wife, and went into the cowshed. Uneasy dreams pursued him; he dreamt that his dead wife was trying to force herself into the cowshed. He got up and looked into the stable. Slimakowa was lying there peacefully; two faint beams of light were reflected from the eyes which had not yet been closed.

A sledge stopped at the gate and Gryb came into the yard; his grey head shook and his yellowish

eyes moved uneasily. He was followed by his man, who was carrying a large basket.

'I am to blame,' he cried, striking his chest, 'are you still angry with me?'

'God give you all that you desire,' said Slimak, bowing low, 'you are coming to me in my time of trouble.'

This humility pleased the old peasant; he grasped Slimak's hand and said in a more natural voice: 'I tell you, I am to blame, for his Reverence told me to say that. Therefore I am the first to make it up with you, although I am the elder. But I must say, neighbour, you did annoy me very much. However, I will not reproach you.'

'Forgive me the wrong I have done,' said Slimak, bending towards his shoulder, 'but to tell you the truth, I cannot remember ever having wronged you personally.'

'I won't mince matters, Slimak. You dealt with those railway people without consulting me.'

'Look at what I have earned by my trading,' said Slimak, pointing to his burnt homestead.

'Well, God has punished you heavily, and that is why I say: I am to blame. But when you came to church and your wife—God rest her eternally—bought herself a silk kerchief, you ought to have treated me to at least a pint of vodka, instead of speaking impertinently to me.'

'It 's true, I boasted too early.'

'And then you made friends with the Germans and prayed with them.'

'I only took off my cap. Their God is the same as ours.'

Gryb shook his clenched fist in his face.

'What! their God is the same as ours? I tell

you, he must be a different God, or why should they jabber to him in German ? But never mind,' he changed his tone, ' all that 's past and gone. You deserve well of us, because you did not let the Germans have your land. Hamer has already offered me his farm for midsummer.'

' Is that so ? '

' Of course it is so. The scoundrels threatened to drive us all away, and they have smashed themselves against a small gospodarz of ten acres. You deserve God's blessing and our friendship for that. God rest your dead wife eternally ! Many a time has she set you against me ! I'll bear her no grudge on that account, however. And here, you see, all of us in the village are sending you some victuals.'

Their conversation was interrupted by the arrival of Grochowski.

' I wouldn't believe Jonah, when he came to tell me all this,' he said, ' and you here, Gryb, too ? Where is the defunct ? '

They approached to the stable and knelt down in the snow. Only the murmuring of their prayers and Slimak's sobs were audible for a while. Then the men got up and praised the dead woman's virtues.

' I am bringing you a bird,' then said Grochowski, turning to Gryb ; ' he is slightly wounded.'

' What do you mean ? '

' It's your Jasiek. He attempted to steal my horses last night, and I treated him to a little lead.'

' Where is he ? '

' In the sledge outside.'

Gryb ran off at a heavy trot. Blows and cries were heard, then the old man reappeared, dragging

his son by the hair. The strong young fellow was crying like a child. He looked dishevelled and his clothes were torn; a bloodstained cloth was tied round his hand.

'Did you steal the Soltys' horses?' shouted his father.

'How should I not have stolen them? I did steal them!'

'Not quite,' said Grochowski, 'but he did steal Slimak's.'

'What?' cried Gryb, and began to lay on to his son again.

'I did, father. Leave off!' wailed Jasiek.

'My God, how did this come about?' asked the old man.

'That 's simple enough,' sneered Grochowski, 'he found others as bad as himself, and they robbed the whole neighbourhood, till I winged him.'

'What do you propose to do now?' asked old Gryb between his blows.

'I'll mend my ways.' . . . 'I'll marry Orzchewski's daughter,' wailed Jasiek.

'Perhaps this is not quite the moment for that,' said Grochowski, 'first you will go to prison.'

'You don't mean to charge him?' asked his father.

'I should prefer not to charge him, but the whole neighbourhood is indignant about the robberies. However, as he did not do me personally any harm, I am not bound to charge him.'

'What will you take?'

'Not a kopek less than a hundred and fifty roubles.'

'In that case, let him go to prison.'

'A hundred and fifty to me, and eighty to Slimak for the horses.'

Gryb took to his fists again.

'Who put you up to this?'

'Leave off!' cried Jasiek; 'it was Josel.'

'And why did you do as he told you?'

'Because I owe him a hundred roubles.'

'Oh Lord!' groaned Gryb, tearing his hair.

'Well, that 's nothing to tear your hair about,' said Grochowski. 'Come; three hundred and thirty roubles between Slimak, Josel, and me; what is that to you?'

'I won't pay it.'

'All right! In that case he will go to prison. Come along.' He took the youth by the arm.

'Dad, have pity, I am your only son!'

The old man looked helplessly at the peasants in turn.

'Are you going to ruin my life for a paltry sum?'

'Wait . . . wait,' cried Gryb, seeing that the Soltys was in earnest. He took Slimak aside.

'Neighbour, if there is to be peace between us,' he said, 'I'll tell you what you will have to do.'

'What?'

'You'll have to marry my sister. You are a widower, she is a widow. You have ten acres, she has fifteen. I shall take her land, because it is close to mine, and give you fifteen acres of Hamer's land. You will have a gospodarstwo of twenty-five acres all in one piece.'

Slimak reflected for a while.

'I think,' he said at last, 'Gawdrina's land is better than Hamer's.'

'All right! You shall have a bit more.'

Slimak scratched his head. 'Well, I don't know,' he said.

'It 's agreed, then,' said Gryb, 'and now I'll tell you what you will have to do in return. You will pay a hundred and fifty roubles to Grochowski and a hundred to Josel.'

Slimak demurred.

'I haven't buried my wife yet.'

The old man's temper w s rising.

'Rubbish! don't be a fool! How can a gospodarz get along without a wife? Yours is dead and gone, and if she could speak, she would say: "Marry, Josef, and don't turn up your nose at a benefactor like Gryb."'

'What are you quarrelling about?' cried Grochowski.

'Look here, I am offering him my sister and fifteen acres of land, four cows and a pair of horses, to say nothing of the household property, and he can't make up his mind,' said Gryb, with a wry face.

'Why, that 's certainly worth while,' said Grochowski, 'and not a bad wife!'

'Aye, a good, hefty woman,' cried Gryb.

'You'll be quite a gentleman, Slimak,' added Grochowski.

Slimak sighed. 'I'm sorry,' he said, 'that Jagna did not live to see this.'

The agreement was carried out, and before Holy Week both Slimak and Gryb's son were married. By the autumn Slimak's new gospodarstwo was finished, and an addition to his family expected. His second wife not unfrequently reminded him that he had been a beggar and owed all his good fortune to her. At such times he would slip out of

the house, lie under the lonely pine and meditate, recalling the strange struggle, when the Germans had lost their land and he his nearest and dearest.

When everybody else had forgotten Slimakowa, Stasiek, Maciek, and the child, he often remembered them, and also the dog Burek and the cow doomed to the butcher's knife for want of fodder.

Silly Zoska died in prison, old Sobieska at the inn. The others with whom my story is concerned, not excepting old Jonah, are alive and well.

A PINCH OF SALT

BY

ADAM SZYMÁNSKI

It was in the fourth year of my exile to the metropolis of the Siberian frosts, a few days before Christmas, when one of our comrades and fellow-sufferers, a former student at the university of Kiev, who hailed from Little-Russia, called in to give us some interesting news. One of his intimate friends—also an ex-student and fellow-sufferer—was to pass through our town on his way back from a far-distant Yakut aúl,[1] where he had lived for three years; he was due to arrive on Christmas Eve.

We had repeatedly met people who knew the life in the nearer Yakut settlements; now and then we had seen temporary or permanent inhabitants of the so-called Yakut 'towns' of Vjerchojansk, Vilujsk, and Kalymsk. But the nearer aúls and towns were populous centres of human life in comparison to those far-off deserted and desolate places; they gave one no conception of what the latter might be like. Certainly the fact that the worst criminals, when they were sent to those regions, preferred to return to hard labour rather than live in liberty there, gave us an

[1] *Aúl:* a hamlet.

illustration of the charms of that life, yet it told us nothing definite.

Bad—we were told—very bad it was out there, but in what way bad it was impossible to judge, even from the knowledge we had of life in less remote regions. Who would venture to draw conclusions from the little we knew as to the thousand small details which made up that grey, monotonous existence ? Who could clearly bring them before the imagination ? Only experience could reveal them in their appalling nakedness. Of one thing we were certain, that was that in a measure as the populousness decreases, and you move away in a centrifugal direction from where we were, life becomes harder and more and more distressing for human beings. In the south, on the wild high plateaus of the Aldon ; in the east, on the mountain slopes of the Stanovoi-Chebret, where a single Tungus family constitutes the sole population along a river of 300 versts ; in the west on the desolate heights of the Viluj, near the great Zeresej Lake ; in the north at the mysterious outlets of the Quabrera, the desert places of the Olensk, Indigirika, and Kolyma, life becomes like a Danteësque hell, consisting in nothing but ice, snow and gales, and lighted up by the lurid blood-red rays of the northern light.

But no ! those deserts, equal in extent to the half of Europe, are only the purgatory, not yet the real Siberian hell. You still find woods there, poor, thin, dwarfed woods, it is true, but where there is wood there is fire and vitality. The true hell of human torture begins beyond the line of the woods ; then there is nothing but ice and snow ; ice that does not even melt in the plains in summer—and

in the midst of that icy desert, miserable human beings thrown upon this shore by an alien fate.

* * * * * *

I shall never forget the impression which any chance bit of information on the characteristic features, the horrible details of that life, used to make upon me. Even clearly defined facts and exact technical terms bear quite a different aspect in the light of such unusual local conditions.

I have a vivid remembrance of a story told me by a former official; he described to me how when he was stationed in V. as Ispravnik, 'a certain gentleman' was sent out to him with orders to take him to the settlement in Zaszyversk.[1]

'You see, little brother,' said the ex-Ispravnik, 'the town of Zaszyversk does exist. Even on a small map of Siberia you can easily find it to the right of a large blank space; if you remember your geography lessons you will even know that it is designated as "town out of governmental bounds". An appointment to such a place means for an official that he is expected to send in his resignation; as for the towns, it means that they have been degraded by having ceased to be the seat of certain local government. In this case there was a yet deeper significance in the description, for the town of Zaszyversk does, as I said, exist, but only in the imagination of cartographers and in geography manuals, not in reality. So much so is it non-existent that not a single house, not a yurta,[2] not a hovel marks the place which is pointed out to you on the map. When I read the order I could not believe my eyes, and though I was sober

[1] Pronounce: Zashiversk.

[2] Yurta: hut of the native Yakut.

I reeled. I called another official and showed him the curious document.

'He was an old, experienced hand at the office, but when he saw this order, the paper dropped from his hands. "Where to?" I asked. "To Zaszyversk!" We looked at each other. Nice things that young man must have been up to! There he stood, looked and listened and understood nothing.

'He was a handsome fellow but gloomy and stuck up. I asked him one thing after another, was he in need of anything? and so on, but he answered nothing but "Yes" or "No". Well, my little brother, I thought to myself, you will soon sing a different tune! I ordered three troikas to be brought round; he was put into the first with the Cossack who escorted him, I was in the second with an old Cossack, who remembered where this town of Zaszyversk had once stood, and the third contained provisions; then we started. First we drove straight on for twenty-four hours; during this time we still stopped at stations where we changed horses, and we covered 200 versts. The second and third days we covered 150 versts, but we did not meet a living soul, and we spent the nights in the large barnlike buildings without windows or chimneys and with only a fireplace, which are found on the road; they are called "povarnia".

'Our prisoner was obviously beginning to feel rather bad, so he addressed me from time to time; at last he tried to get information out of me concerning the life in Zaszyversk. "How many inhabitants were there? what was the town like? was there any chance of his finding something to do there, perhaps private lessons?" But now it was my turn to answer him: "Yes" or "No". On the

fourth day, towards morning, we entered upon a glacier. We had arrived in the region where the ice does not disappear even in summer. When we had advanced ten versts on the ice, the old Cossack showed me the place where sixty years ago a few yurtas had stood which were called in geographical terms "Zaszyversk, town out of governmental bounds".

'"Stop," I cried, "let the young gentleman get out; here we are! This is the town of Zaszyversk. . . ."

'The man did not understand at once, he opened his eyes wide and thought it was a joke, or that I had lost my reason. I had to explain the situation to him. . . . At last he understood.'

The ex-Ispravnik laughed dryly. 'Will you believe me or not?' he continued. 'Look here, I swear by the cross'—he crossed himself spaciously, bowing to the images of the saints—'that fellow's eyes became glassy . . . his jaws chattered as in a fever. It was a business!

'And I, a tough old official, I put my hands to my forehead. You should have seen how the gentleman's pride disappeared in a moment; he became soft as wax and so humble . . . pliable as silk he was!

'"I adjure you by the wounds of Christ," he cried, stretching out his hands to me, "let the love of God come into your heart! I have not been condemned to death, there is nothing very serious against me, I have been too overbearing, that is all."

'"Oh," I said, "well, you see, pride is a great sin."

'And whether you will believe me or won't'—he crossed himself again—'the man wept like a child when I told him I would take him to the nearest

Yakut yurta, at a distance of thirty versts from the town of Zaszyversk, and I swear to you for the third time it was with joy that he wept... although he was not much better off in that yurta. . . .'

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It is easy to imagine how eagerly we received the news of the arrival of a man who had actually been living somewhere at the end of the world under conditions which had completely isolated him for three whole years; yet it was said that he was returning into this world sound in body and mind. We inhabitants of our own special town were not living in the most enviable of circumstances either, but we all knew that they were infinitely happier than they might have been.

A passionate desire seized us to look upon that life out there in its unveiled nakedness, its horrible cruelty. This curiosity meant more than narrow selfishness; it had a special reason.

The fact that a human being had been able to survive in that far-distant world, bore witness to the strength and resistance of the human spirit; the iron will and energy of the one doubled and steeled the strength of all the others.

What we had heard so far of those who were battling with their fate at the end of the world had not been too comforting. Therefore the question whether and how one could live and suffer there, was a vital one for us.

And now the news came unexpectedly that one of our own class, a man closely allied to us by his intellectual development and a number of ways and customs, had actually lived for three years in a yurta not much better situated than the one behind the imaginary town of Zaszyversk. This

unknown youth, student of a university not our own, became dear to us. We all—Russians, Poles, and Jews—bound together by our common fate, made up our minds to celebrate his arrival, and as it was timed for Christmas Eve, we were going to prepare a solemn feast in his honour.

As I was the one who had the greatest experience in culinary affairs, I was charged with the arrangement of the dinner, supported by a young student, and by the intense interest of the whole colony. I am sure that neither I nor my dear scullion have ever in our lives before or after worked as hard for two days in the kitchen as we did then.

The student was not only a great collector of everything useful for our daily life, he was also deeply versed in the knowledge of the Yakut in general. While we were cooking and roasting we told one another the most interesting things, and thus stimulated each other to such a degree that the dinner, originally planned on simple lines, began to assume Lucullian dimensions.

We knew only too well how miserable the life in the nearest Yakut yurtas was, that there was a want of the most necessary European food, such as would be found in the poorest peasant's home ; above all, the want of bread—simple daily bread—was very pronounced among the poorer populations. It was not surprising that we two, possessed by gloomy pictures which we recalled to our memory, fell into a sort of cooking-fever. Like a mother who remembers the favourite dishes of the child she has not seen for a long time, and whom she expects home on a certain day, we kept on racking our brains for agreeable surprises for our guest. One or the other would constantly ask :

'What do you think, comrade, wouldn't he like this or that?'

'Well, of course, he would thoroughly enjoy that. Just think, counting the journeys, it must be a good five years since he has eaten food fit for human beings.'

'Shall we add that?'

'All right!'

And one of us ran to the market-place to fetch the necessary ingredients from the shops, another secured kitchen utensils, and soon another course enriched the menu. At last the supply of kitchen utensils gave out, and want of time as well as physical exhaustion put a stop to further exertions. Our enthusiasm had communicated itself to all the participants of the feast, for they were all of a responsive disposition, and declared themselves charmed with our inventiveness and energy. I and my scullion were proud of our work. A huge fish, weighing twenty pounds, which after much trouble we had succeeded in boiling whole, was considered the crowning success of our labour and art. We rightly anticipated that this magnificent fish, prepared with an appallingly highly seasoned and salted sauce, would move the hardest hearts. Also, we did not forget a small Christmas tree, and decorated it as best we could in honour of our guest.

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At last the longed-for day came. The student started at dawn for the nearest posting station to await the newcomer and bring him to us. Before two o'clock, when it began to be dark, we were all assembled, and soon after two the melancholy sound of the sleighbells announced the arrival of the students. We hurriedly pulled on our furs and

went out. The sleigh and the travellers were entirely covered with snow, long icicles hung from the horses' nostrils when they whipped into the courtyard, they were covered with a fine crust of ice. Another moment and they stood still in front of the door. Every man bared his head . . . there were some who had grown grey in misery and sorrow.

* * * * * *

I will not describe our first greeting—I could not do so even if I would. We did not know each other, and yet how near we felt! I doubt whether it will ever fall to my share again to be one of a number of human beings so different in birth and station in life, yet so nearly related, so closely tied to each other as we were on the day when we greeted our guest.

He was small and thin—very thin. His complexion showed yellow and black, much more than ours did; he seemed marked for life by an earthen colour; his deeply sunk eyes were the only feature which was burning with vitality, they had a phosphorescent glow.

It had grown quite dark by the time he had changed his clothes and warmed himself, and we were sitting down to our dinner. Noise and vivacity predominated in our small abode; a cheerful mood rose like an overflowing wave, washing away all signs of sorrow and bitterness.

'Let us be cheerful!'

Louder and louder this cry arose, now here, now there, and when our guest took it up even the gloomiest faces brightened. We broke the sacred wafer, then we emptied the first glasses. My industrious scullion had been deeply moved by

a folk-song from the Ukraine, one of those songs rich in poetical feeling and simple metaphor which go straight to the heart; he therefore got up to make the welcoming speech, and, encouraged by the tears of joy which rose in the eyes of our guest, he quite took possession of him. He told him that he and I had worked uninterruptedly for two days and nights in the sweat of our brows, so as to give him a noble repast after his many days of privation and hunger; he forecast the whole menu, beginning with his favourite Kutja, he drew close to him and put his arm round his neck, laughing gaily, and seemingly inspiring him so that he wept tears of joy.

Our animated mood rose higher and higher. A storm of applause greeted the first course. The student filled the guest's plate to the brim. At last the harmonious rattle of the spoons replaced the laughing and talking. 'Excellent,' was the universal verdict.

My scullion was in raptures and loudly assented; finally he too became silent and applied himself like us to his plate.

But what in the name of God did this mean? We were all eating, only our guest fumbled about with his spoon and stirred his soup without eating, laughing the while with a suppressed, hardly audible laugh.

'My God, what is it? why don't you eat, comrade?' several voices called in unison. 'The scullion has been exciting him too much! Off with him! Our guest must have serious people next to him.'

The student obediently changed places, and we turned to our food again. But still our guest did not eat.

What was the matter ? We stopped eating and all eyes were turned questioningly upon him. Our silent anxiety was sufficiently eloquent. He perceived, felt it and said :

'I . . . forgive me . . . I . . . my happiness . . . I am so sorry . . . I do not want to trouble you, and I fear I shall spoil your pleasure. I beg you . . . I entreat you, dear brothers, take no notice of me . . . it is nothing, it will pass,' and he broke into a strange sobbing laugh.

'Jesus, Mary!' we all cried, for we had not noticed before how unnatural his laugh was; there was no further thought of eating; and he, when he saw the general anxiety, mastered himself with an effort and said rapidly amidst the general silence :

'I thought you knew what the life was like that I have lived for three years, but I see you don't know it; when I realized this I tried . . . I . . . well, I tried while you were eating and drinking to swallow a small piece of bread . . . just a tiny piece of bread . . . but I cannot do it . . . I cannot! You see, for three years . . . three whole years I have tasted no salt . . . I ate all my food without salt, and this bread is rather salt—very salt in fact, it is burning and scorching me, and probably all the other things are also very salt.'

'Certainly, some were even salted too much in our haste and eagerness,' I answered simultaneously with the student.

'Well then, eat, beloved brothers, eat, but I cannot eat anything; I shall watch you with great pleasure—eat, I beg you fervently!' and with hysterical laughter and tears he sank back into his seat.

Now we understood this laugh which was like a spasm. . . .

Not one of us was able to swallow the food which he had in his mouth.

The misery of the existence of which we had longed to know something had lifted the veil off a small portion of its mysteries.

We all dropped our spoons and hung our heads.

How vain, how small appeared to us now the trouble we had taken about the food, how clumsy our childish enjoyment!

And while we looked at the ravaged face of our brother, convulsed with spasmodic laughter and tears, a feeling of horror seized upon us. . . .

We felt as if the spectre of death had risen from a lonely yurta somewhere behind the lost town of Zaszyversk and was staring at us with cold glassy eyes. . . .

A dead silence brooded over the frightened assembly.

KOWALSKI THE CARPENTER

A SIBERIAN SKETCH

BY

ADAM SZYMÁNSKI

I MADE his acquaintance accidentally; the chance which led to it was caused by the peculiar conditions of the Yakut spring. My readers will probably only have a very imperfect knowledge of the Yakut spring.

From the middle of April onwards the sun begins to be pretty powerful in Yakutsk; in May it hardly leaves the horizon for a few hours and is roasting hot; but as long as the great Lena has not thrown off the shackles of winter, and as long as the huge masses of unmelted snow are lying in the taiga,[1] you can see no trace of spring. The snow is not warmed by the earth, which has been frozen hard to the depth of several feet, and this thick crust of ice opposes determined resistance to the lifegiving rays, and only after long, patient labour does the sun succeed in awakening to new life the secret depths of the taiga and the queen of Yakut waters, 'Granny Lena', as the Yakut calls the great river.

In the last days of the month of May, when this battle of vitalizing warmth against the last

[1] Primaeval forest.

remnants of the cruel winter is nearing its end, the newly arrived European witnesses a scene which is without parallel anywhere in the west. Every sound resembling a report, however distant and indistinct, has a wonderful effect upon the people out in the open; children and the aged, men and women are suddenly rooted to the spot, turn to the east towards the river, crane their necks and seem to be listening for something.

If the peculiar sounds cease or turn out to be caused accidentally, everybody quietly goes home. But if the reports continue, and swell to such dimensions that the air seems filled with a noise like the firing of great guns or the rolling of thunder, accompanied by subterranean rushing like the coming of a great gale, then these silent people become unusually animated. Joyful shouts of 'The ice is cracking! the river is breaking! do you hear?' are heard from all sides; eagerly and noisily the people run in all directions to carry the news into the farthest cottages. Everybody knocks at the doors he passes, be they his friends' or a stranger's; and calls out the magic word 'The Lena is breaking!' These words spread like wildfire in many tongues through far-off houses, yurtas and Yakut settlements, and whoever is able to move puts on his furs and runs to the banks of the Lena.

A dense crowd is thronging the banks, watching in fascination one of the most beautiful natural phenomena in Siberia.

Gigantic blocks of ice, driven down by the powerful waves of the broad river, are packed to the height of houses—of mountains; they break, they crash; covered with myriads of small needles

of ice, they seem to be floating in the sun, displaying a marvellous wealth of colour.

But one must have lived here for at least one winter to understand what it is that drives this crowd of human beings to the river banks. It is not the magnificent display of nature that attracts them.

In the long struggle against winter these people have exhausted all their strength; for many months they have been awaiting the vivifying warmth with longing and impatience, now they hasten hither to witness the triumph of the sun over the cruel enemy.

An intense, almost childlike joy is depicted on the yellow faces of the Yakuts, their broad lips smile good-naturedly and appear broader still, their little black eyes glow like coals. The whole crowd is swaying as if intoxicated. 'God be praised! God be praised!' they call to each other, turn towards the huge icebergs which are now being destroyed by the friendly element, and shout and rejoice over the defeat of the merciless enemy, driven, crushed and annihilated by the inexorable waves.

When the ice-drifts on the Lena have come to an end, the earth quickly thaws, although only to a depth of two feet. But nature makes the most of the three months of warmth. Within a comparatively short time everything develops and unfolds.

The great plain of Yakutsk offers a charming spectacle; it is fertile, and here and there cultivation already begins to show. Birchwoods, small lakes, brushwood and verdant fields alternate and make the whole country look like a large park,

framed by the silver ribbon of the Lena. The surrounding gloom of the taiga emphasizes the natural beauty of the valley. This smiling plain in the midst of the wide expanse reminds one of an oasis in the desert.

The Yakut is by far the most capable of the Siberian tribes; he values the gifts of the life-giving sun and enjoys them to the full. When he escapes from his narrow, stinking winter-yurta he fills his hitherto inhospitable country with life and movement; his energy is doubled, his vitality pulsates with greater strength and intensity. When the 'Ysech', the feast of spring, is over, the animated mood of the population does not abate in the least. The 'strengthening kumis', the ambrosia of the Yakut gods, does not run dry in the wooden vessels, for luxuriant grass covers the ground, and cows and mares give abundant milk.

The sight of the lovely plain and the joyful human beings delighting in the summer had revived me also. This was my first summer in Yakutsk, and I responded to it with my whole being. Daily I went for walks to look at the beauty of the surrounding world, daily I took my sun bath.

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My walks usually led me to one of the Yakut yurtas; they are at long distances from each other, lonely and scattered over the whole country. You find them in whatever direction you may choose.

Cold milk and kumis can be had in all these yurtas. It is true both have the nasty smell which the stranger in this part of the world calls 'Yakut odour'; but during the long winter when milk other than from Yakut yurtas was hard to procure,

I had got used to this specific smell, so that now it only produced a mild nausea.

One of the many yurtas had taken my fancy, for it was charmingly situated close to the woods in a corner of the raised banks of a long stretch of lake. It belonged to an aged Yakut, well deserving of the honourable designation 'ohonior', given to all the Yakut elders.

The old man was living there with his equally aged wife and a young fellow, a distant relation of his. Two cows and a calf, a few mares and a foal constituted all their wealth.

All the Yakuts are very inquisitive and loquacious. But my friend, the honourable 'ohonior', possessed these qualities in an unusually high degree, and as he was able to speak broken Russian, I often took occasion to call in for a little talk.

First of all he wished to know who I was, where I came from and what was my business here. Towards the Russians, whether strangers or natives of Siberia, the Yakuts are always on their guard and excessively obsequious. Every Russian, however poorly dressed, is always the 'tojan', the master. Their behaviour towards the Poles, on the other hand, is very friendly. No Yakut ever took the information that I was not a Russian but a 'Bilak'—Polak—with indifference.

'Bilak? Bilak? Excellent brother!' exclaimed even the most reticent among them. The 'ohonior' and I therefore soon became friends, and when he learned that in addition I was versed in the art of writing and might be employed as secretary to the community and draw up petitions to the 'great master'—the 'gubernator'—my value was immensely increased, and this respect saved me from

too great an intimacy. Owing to this consideration I was always offered the best milk and kumis, and when the old woman handed me a jug she carefully wiped it with her fingers first, or removed every trace of dirt with her tongue.

One day when I called in passing to drink my kumis, I found the 'ohonior' unusually excited; he was not only talkative, but also in very great spirits. His tongue was a little heavy, although he showed no sign of old age. It turned out that my honourable host had just returned from the town, where he had indulged in vodka to warm his feeble frame.

'The Bilaks are good, are all good,' he stammered, while he crammed his little pipe with tobacco, 'every Bilak is a clerk, or at least a doctor, or even a smith, as good as a Yakut one. You are a good man too, and you must be a good clerk; we all love the Bilaks, a Sacha[1] never forgets that the Bilak is his brother. But will you believe it, brother, it is not long since this is so? I myself was afraid of the Bilaks as of evil spirits until about fifteen years ago, and yet I am so old that the calves have grazed off the meadows seventy times before my eyes. When I saw a Bilak, I would run like a hare wherever my feet would carry me—into the wood or into the bushes, never mind where, so long as I could escape from him.

And not only I but everybody dreaded the Bilaks, for, you see, people told each other dreadful things about them, that they had horns and slew everybody, and so on.'

I ascertained that these fairy-tales had had their origin in the town, and reproached the old

[1] The name by which the Yakuts call themselves.

man for his credulity, but he bridled up at once.

'Goodness gracious! do you think we believed all that on hearsay? I don't know about other people, but I and all my neighbours believed it because our forefathers knew for certain that every Bilak was terrible and dangerous.'

The old man refreshed himself from the jug and continued:

'Do you see, it was like this. My father was not yet born, my grandfather was a little fellow for whom they were still collecting the "Kalym"[1] when there came to this neighbourhood a Bilak with eyes of ice,[2] a long beard and long moustaches; he settled here, not in the valley but up on yonder mountain-side in the taiga. That was not taiga, as you see it now, but thick and wild, untouched by any axe. There the Bilak found an empty yurta and settled in it.

'But he had no sooner gone to live there than the taiga became impassable at a distance of ten versts round the cottage. The Bilak ran about with his gun in his hand, and when he caught sight of anyone he covered him with his gun, and unless the man ran away he would pop at him—but not for fun, he didn't mind whom he shot, even if it were a Cossack. What he lived on? The gods of the taiga know! Nobody else did. Every living thing shunned him like the plague. Those who caught sight of him in the forest when he ran about like a devil said that at first he wore clothes such

[1] The price for the future wife which is paid in cattle and horses; it is collected early in the boy's life.

[2] The black-eyed Yakuts speak thus of the blue-eyed races.

as the Russian gentlemen wear who know how to write, but later on he was dressed in skins which he must have tanned himself. People said he got to look more and more terrible and wild. His beard grew down to his waist, his face got paler and paler and his eyes burnt like flames. Some years passed. Then one winter, at the time of the worst frosts, when a murderous "chijus" broke,[1] he was not seen for several days. As a rule he had been observed from a distance, so the people gave notice in the town that someone should come and ascertain what had happened to him.

'They came and closed in upon the cottage carefully. There was the Bilak on the bed in his furs, all covered with snow, and in his hand he held a cross. The Bilak was dead; perhaps hunger had killed him, perhaps the frost, or maybe the devil had taken him. Now tell me, was there no reason for us to be afraid of the Bilaks? Here was only a single one who drove all the neighbourhood to flight, and now all of a sudden a great many of you arrived? He! he! he! You know how to write, brother, but you are yet very young! So you thought people had no good reasons for their fears? Well, you see, you were mistaken. A Sachà is cleverer than he looks!'

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This legend of a Pole who could not bear to look upon human beings—a legend I repeatedly heard again later—made a deep impression upon me. These woods, these fields where I was walking now had perhaps been haunted by the unfortunate man, driven mad and wild with excess of sorrow.

[1] A column of frozen air, moving southwards. After a chijus corpses of frozen people are generally found.

Had his troubles been beyond endurance or had he been unable to bear the sight of human wickedness and human misery ? Or was it the separation from his home, from those dear to him, that had broken him ?

Dominated altogether by these thoughts, I returned to the town without paying heed to anything around me. I was walking fast, almost at a run, when a long-drawn call coming from somewhere close by struck upon my ear :

' Kallarrá ! Kallarrá ! '

At first I neither understood the call nor whence it came, but on frequent repetition it dawned upon me that it proceeded from the bushes at a little distance in front of me, and that it was meant to be the Yakut call ' Come here, come here, brother ! ' I even divined, as I came nearer, what manner of man it was that was calling. No Yakut, no Russian, be he a native or a settler, could have mispronounced this Yakut word so badly ; it should have been ' Kelerè ! '

Only my countrymen, the Masurs, could do such violence to the beautiful, sonorous Yakut language. During my long sojourn in Yakutsk I have never met a Masurian peasant who pronounced this word otherwise than ' Kallarrá '.

Indeed, there he was, behind the bushes beyond a bridge spanning the marsh or dried-up arm of the Lena—a man in the ordinary clothes of deported criminals ; he agitated his arms violently, and continually repeated his call ' Kallarrá ' !

This was addressed to a Yakut who became visible on the outskirts of the brushwood, but it was in vain, for the wary Yakut had no intention of drawing nearer. The caller must have realized

this, for when he arrived at the bridge he called once more 'Kal arè! you dog!' Then he ceased and only swore to himself: 'May you burst, may you swell, you son of a dog!'

When he noticed me, he stood still. I came up to him and greeted him in Polish, 'Praised be Jesus Christ!'

The peasant could not get over his amazement. 'Oh Jesus! where do you come from, sir?' he cried.

We soon made friends. He lived somewhere in an uluse,[1] and had gone into the town to hire himself out for work in the gold mines; he had secured work and was to start at once, driving a herd of cattle to his new abode. He was grazing them when I met him, and as some of them had gone astray, and he was unable to drive them all across the bridge singlehanded, he was waiting for someone to come along and help him. I gladly lent him a hand, and when the herd had been got across the bridge and was quietly going along, we began to talk. I asked him with whom he was lodging.

'With Kowalski,' he said.

I knew all the Poles in Yakutsk, but I had never heard of Kowalski.

'Well, I mean Kowalski the carpenter.'

Still I did not know whom he meant.

'Who are his friends? whom does he go to see?' I inquired.

'He is peculiar. They all know him, but he does not go to see them.'

'How do you mean: he does not go to see them?'

'How should he go to see them? He has got

[1] A settlement consisting of several yurtas.

clump feet, he has lost his toes with frostbite. When the wounds are closed he can just manage, but when they are open he cannot even move about in his room.'

'How does he manage to live?'

'He does a little carpentering; he has a beautiful workshop and all sorts of tools, but I tell you when he can't stand on his feet he can't do carpentering. Then he is glad when people come and give him orders for brushes—he can make beautiful brushes as well—for sweeping rooms or for brushing clothes. But the rooms here are not swept much, and people rarely brush their clothes either. Now he is ill again.'

'Where does he come from? How long has he been here?'

'He has been here a long time, there were only a few like us when he came. But where he comes from, who he is—I see you don't know Kowalski, or else you wouldn't ask. For you see, when I ask him, or one of the gentlemen, or even the priest, who comes from Irkutsk, he only answers: "Brother, God knows very well who I am and where I come from, but it serves no purpose and is quite unnecessary that you should know it too!" There you are! That 's like him. So nobody asks him.'

I inquired very particularly all the same where Kowalski lived. In my imagination the 'Bilak' of the legend who fled from men and this lonely carpenter were blended into one personality, I could not say why. I felt that there must be a mysterious connexion as between all things repeating themselves in the circle of time. Perhaps the great sorrow which—I imagined—had died at the death of the Bilak was still living on quite

close to me, in a different shape, but just as great, no less unbearable and fateful to him in whom it now dwelt.

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Since that day I had often guided my steps in the direction of Kowalski's yurta. No fresh shavings were added to the old ones lying about near the door and the little windows. They grew drier and blacker every day; perhaps the man who had thrown them there. . . . I had not the courage to enter. I kept on waiting for another day when perhaps fresh shavings would be added, but none appeared and no noises of work were audible.

At last I made up my mind not to put it off any longer. I left my home with this decision and had already reached a corner of his yurta, when I heard a trembling, weak but pleasant voice singing.

I sat down on the bench in front of the yurta, and I could distinctly hear every word of a sentimental, gently melancholy little ditty which had once been very popular in Poland :

> ' When the fields are fresh and green,
> And the spring revives the world.'

But after the third verse the singing suddenly ceased and a voice called out gloomily :

' Doggy, go and bark at the Almighty ! '

At first I did not know what this peculiar command meant, but after a short pause I heard the thin bark of a dog, and as the gate of the enclosure was open I drew nearer and saw in the wide open door of the yurta a small black dog, tiny and light, repeatedly raising itself on its hindlegs and barking up at the blue sky while it jumped and turned about.

Of course I went away and put off my visit to a more suitable occasion.

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At last I saw him. He was of middle stature, quite greyheaded, and he looked very neglected. The ashen complexion common to all exiles distinguished him in a high degree, so that it gave me pain to look into his face with the black shadows.

If he had not been talking, and moving about, it would have been hard to guess that one was looking at a living being. And yet, glances like lightning would sometimes dart from the large eyes surrounded by broad, dark circles, and they showed that death had not yet numbed the inner life of this moving corpse, but that he was still capable of emotion.

As long as he was sitting I could bear the sight of his suffering face, but when he got up I had to turn away my eyes, for then his clump-feet seemed to cause him the greatest agony.

He spoke Polish correctly and with a pure accent. He carefully avoided any direct or indirect allusion to his past, and shrank equally from information about his native country. He talked exclusively about the present, principally about his dog, with whom he held long conversations. Only once in the course of the few weeks during which I visited him did he get animated : that was when I mentioned Plotsk ; his eyes shone as with a hidden fire while he asked : ' Do you know that part ? '

I answered that I had lived there for a year, and he said, half to himself :

' I suppose it is all quite changed, so many years have passed. You probably were not born at the

time when I came to Siberia. In what part of the province did you stay ? '

' Not far from Raciaz.'

He opened his mouth, but he felt he had said too much, or that I was listening with curiosity ; enough—he only uttered a long-drawn ' Oh . . . ' and was silent again.

This was the only allusion Kowalski ever made to his past. I felt inclined to draw him out, but he knew how to parry these attempts in a delicate way by calling his dog and saying to him while he caressed him : ' Go, bark at the Almighty ! ' And the obedient creature would continue for a long time to bark at the sky.

As soon as Kowalski gave this order, it was a sure sign that he would not open his mouth except for conversation about his dog, of which he never tired.

Although this dog was quite ordinary, he was in several ways distinguished from his Yakut brothers. For one thing he had no name and was simply addressed as ' Doggy ', though he was his master's pet and was attached to the house and enclosure.

' Why didn't you give your dog a name ? ' I asked casually.

' What 's the good of a name ? If people had not invented so many names and called each other simply " Man ", they would perhaps remember better that we are all men together.'

So the dog remained nameless. He was of a graceful and delicate build and fast, quite unlike the heavier, thickset, thick-coated native dogs ; his hair was short, soft, and silky. His appearance had condemned him to an isolated and lonely life. Attempts at participation in the canine

social life had failed deplorably; he had returned from these expeditions lame and bleeding all over, and after some vain repetitions he had given up the hope of satisfying his social instincts and did not leave the enclosure any more. He was surprisingly sedate for his delicate organism and thin, mobile little frame, but this was not the calm sedateness of the strong, shaggy Yakut dogs, against whom he obviously harboured a certain hatred and bitterness, because these big, powerful creatures would not recognize the rights of the weak. Except for his master, he showed no affection for anyone and accepted no favours—perhaps he had no belief in them, and only responded to a caress with a low growl.

* * * * * *

Some weeks passed and Kowalski was no better, on the contrary he seemed to get worse with every day, and we were all convinced that this illness was his last. God knows whether he was equally convinced, but he certainly had a foreboding of his death, for he hardly ever talked now. For a few days longer he obstinately struggled against the weakness which was overpowering him, and walked about his yurta, even tinkered at some brushes which he had begun; at last he gave it up and took to his bed. One morning, when I had just sat down to my breakfast, the locksmith Wladyslaw Piotrowski, Kowalski's nearest friend, came to my window and asked me to accompany him to our patient.

'It might ease his last hour when he sees that he is not quite forsaken,' said the kind man. 'Perhaps you would like to take a book with you,' he added.

I took the New Testament and went with him.

'Is he so very bad?' I asked on the way.

'I should think so; he looks quite black and says himself that he is sure he will die to-day.'

We soon arrived at Kowalski's yurta. There was no trace of the usual sick-room smell of medicines, for Kowalski believed neither in doctors nor in medicines. But an air of sadness and desolation pervaded the room. The little dog lay curled up under the bed, from which, notwithstanding the open window, an unpleasant smell reminded one that the sick man was no longer able to get up.

He looked so unlike a living being that we concluded, on entering and seeing him lying there with his eyes closed, that he was dead. The locksmith went up to the bed, put his hand under the bedclothes and touched his feet; they were cold. But Kowalski called out loudly and emphatically as I had never heard him before:

'I am alive! I am glad that you have come, for I should like to speak to you of death.'

The haste and anxiety with which these words were uttered bore out our premonition that we had only just come in time; we looked at each other; Kowalski caught this look and understood it.

'I know,' he said, 'that I shall die soon, it would be vain to hide from myself what I can see quite clearly. That is why I want to speak to you. I was afraid no one would come . . . I was afraid no one would hear what I have got to say and that he whom you call the Merciful God would take away my power of speech. . . . I thank you for your thought. May you not be lonely either when your hour of death calls you from an unhappy life.'

Kowalski stopped; only his brow, which was alternately contracted and smoothed, showed that the dying man was trying with his last remnant of strength to collect his thoughts and to retain the last spark of life.

It was early morning, and the sun threw two great sheaves of golden rays through the window on to the wall where the bed stood. From the wide expanse of fields and the archipelago of islands in the river, redolent with luxurious vegetation, life and the echoes of life and movement emanated like a melodious song, a great hymn of thanksgiving in the bright sunshine; it penetrated to the bed of the dying man and formed an indescribable contrast to what was passing inside the yurta.

This brightness, this noise as of a great song of life, was like an irony, like scorn levelled at the deathbed of this living corpse. . . .

* * * * * *

Meanwhile Kowalski had begun to speak.

'Long ago,' he said—'it must be about forty years—I was exiled to the steppes of Orenburg. I was young and strong, I trusted in God and had confidence in men and in myself. I may have been right or I may have been wrong, but I thought it was my duty not to leave my energy to the chance of fate, but to try and find a wider field of activity than was open to me in this country. Homesickness too urged me on, and after two years I escaped. . . .

'I was punished by being sent to Tomsk, but this did not daunt me. I started my life afresh with renewed energy, lived on bread and water until I had saved enough for what I needed, and escaped again. . . .

'For this second flight I was punished as an obstinate backslider, and it took several years before I could make another attempt, but that time I got farther away than before. It was an unusually hard winter, I had no money and only insufficient clothing. My feet were frostbitten, and I lost my toes. That was a hard blow, especially as they sent me beyond the Yenessi this time.

'My situation was difficult; the country was dreary and desolate, it was hard to earn a living. But although I had no toes I managed to learn a trade or two, and one or the other used to bring me in a little income, small but sure.

'This time I waited six years, then, without regard for the state of my feet, I started off again. . . .

'You see, I had no more confidence in my strength. I was ill and broken, it was not the same goal as before that drew me westwards. . . . I wanted to die there . . . to die there. . . .

'I dreamt of dying on my mother's grave as of a great happiness.

'My life had been such that no one except my mother had ever been good to me; I had had no sweetheart, no wife, no children. . . .

'And now, feeling weak and forsaken, I longed for the grave of this one being who had loved me.

'In sleepless nights I felt her hand touching my head, her kiss and the hot tears with which she took her last leave of me, conscious perhaps that our separation would be eternal. I do not know even now whether the longing for my mother or for my native land was the stronger. But it was a hard pilgrimage this time. I could not walk fast because of the wounds on my feet which kept breaking

open. I often had to hide for days in the woods like a wild animal.

'Vultures and crows[1]—ill omens of the end—circled over my head, scenting their prey. Worn out with hunger I broke down from time to time, and . . . fool that I was, I always prayed. I implored the Almighty God, the merciful God, the just God, the God of the poor, the God of the forsaken:

'"Help me, have mercy on me! Gracious Father! send me death, I ask for no other mercy than death! I will give it to myself, but only there. . . ."

'Two years passed before I reached the province of Perm. I had never before got so far. My heart began to beat joyously, in my head there was only one thought: "I shall see my beloved native soil, and I shall die at my beloved mother's grave." When I left the Ural behind me I definitely believed in my salvation, I threw myself down upon the ground, and for a long, long time I lay there, sobbing and thanking God for His grace and His mercy. But He, the Merciful, was only preparing His last blow, and that same day. . . . Then they took me as far as Yakutsk! . . .

'Why did I live on so long in this misery?

'Why did I wait here for such an end as this?

'Because I wanted to see what God intended to do to me.

'Now see what He has made of a human being who trusted Him like a child, who has never known what happiness in this world meant, nor demanded it, who has never received love from anyone but his mother and, although maimed and crippled, has worked hard until the end, never stretched out

[1] Siberian fugitives look upon them with superstition.

his hands for alms, never stolen or coveted his neighbours' possessions, who has ever given away the half of what he had . . . see what He has made of me ! . . .

'That is why I hate Him, no longer trust in Him. . . . I don't believe in His Saints or His Judgement or His Justice ; hear me, brothers, I call you to witness in the hour of my death, so that you should know it and can testify to it before Him when you die.'

He raised himself with an effort, stretched out his hands towards the sun and called with a loud voice :

'I, a dying worm, truly acknowledge Thee to be the God of the satiated, the God of the wicked, the God of the impure, and that Thou hast ruined me, a guiltless man ! . . .'

* * * * * *

The sun had risen higher and was now gilding the bed of pain of this living skeleton—terrible to behold in his loose skin.

When he sank back exhausted, we were shocked, for we thought that he would give up the ghost before we had time to comfort him and ease his last hour.

'Let us pray for him,' whispered the locksmith. We knelt down ; with trembling hands I pulled out the book ; it opened of itself where a book-marker had been placed at the fifteenth chapter of the Gospel of St. John.

Raising my voice I began to read :

'I am the true Vine and My Father is the Husbandman.'

The dying man's chest heaved violently, his eyes were closed. He was now quite covered by the

golden rays; it seemed as if the sun meant to reward him at the last moment for his hard life, so closely did the rays hug him, warming his stiff limbs, calming him, kissing him as a mother kisses and caresses her drowsy child and wraps it round with her own warmth.

Kowalski was still alive.

I continued to read the words of Christ, so full of power and faith and deep, blessed hope:

'If the world hate you, ye know that it hated Me before it hated you . . .'

The inspiring words of the Comforter of sufferers and the caress of the vivifying light eased the dying man's pain. He opened his eyes and two great tears welled forth—the last tears which this man had to spare.

The rays of the sun kissed the tears on his ashen countenance and made them shine with divine light; it seemed as if they endeavoured to present to their Creator in pure colours the burning fire which had consumed this man and was concentrated in his tears.

I read on:

'Verily, verily, I say unto you, that ye shall weep and lament, but the world shall rejoice: and ye shall be sorrowful, but your sorrow shall be turned into joy . . .'

The dying man tried to lift his hands, they fell back powerless, but he murmured in a low, distinct voice: 'Lord, by Thy pain forgive me!'

I could not read further. In silence we knelt, and the dog stood between us, puzzled and looking at his master. Once more the dying man's eyes turned towards us, he opened his mouth, and we heard him say yet more slowly and weakly: 'Doggy, do not bark at the Almighty.'

The faithful creature threw himself whining upon his master's limp hand, from which the life had already fled.

Kowalski's eyes closed, a short, dull rattle came from his throat, his chest sank back, he stretched himself a little : the life of suffering was ended.

* * * * * *

When we recovered ourselves we heard the violent barking of the dog, who, without understanding his master's last wish, was faithfully carrying out the sole duty of his life. He barked and growled incessantly, and came back from time to time to the bed and his master's limply hanging hand in expectation of the usual caress.

But his master lay immovable, the cold hand hung stiffly ; exhausted and hoarse the dog ran out again into the enclosure.

We left ; but at a long distance from the yurta we could still hear the barking of the senseless creature.

FOREBODINGS

TWO SKETCHES BY

STEFAN ŻEROMSKI[1]

I HAD spent an hour at the railway station, waiting for the train to come in. I had stared indifferently at several ladies in turn who were yawning in the corners of the waiting-room. Then I had tried the effect of making eyes at a fair-haired young girl with a small white nose, rosy cheeks, and eyes like forget-me-nots; she had stuck out her tongue (red as a field-poppy) at me, and I was now at a loss to know what to do next to kill time.

Fortunately for me two young students entered the waiting-room. They looked dirty from head to foot, mud-bespattered, untidy, and exhausted with travelling. One of them, a fair boy with a charming profile, seemed absent-minded or depressed. He sat down in a corner, took off his cap, and hid his face in his hands. His companion bought his ticket for him, sat down beside him, and grasped his hand from time to time.

'Why should you despair? All may yet be well. Listen, Anton.'

'No, it 's no good, he is dying, I know it. . . . I know . . . perhaps he is dead already.'

'Don't believe it! Has your father ever had this kind of attack before?'

[1] The accent on the Z softens the sound approximately to that of the French g in *gelé*.

'He has; he has suffered from his heart for three years. He used to drink at times. Think of it, there are eight of us, some are young children, and my mother is delicate. In another six months his pension would have been due. Terribly hard luck!'

'You are meeting trouble half-way, Anton.'

The bell sounded, and the waiting-room became a scene of confusion. People seized their luggage and trampled on each other's toes; the porter who stood at the entrance-door was stormed with questions. There was bustle and noise everywhere. I entered the third-class carriage in which the fair-haired student was sitting. His friend had put him into it, settling him in the corner-seat beside the window, as if he were an invalid, and urging him to take comfort. It did not come easy to him, the words seemed to stick in his throat. The fair-haired boy's face twitched convulsively, and his eyelids closed over his moist eyes.

'Anton, my dear fellow,' the other said, 'well, you understand what I mean; God knows. You may be sure . . . confound it all!'

The second bell sounded, and then the third. The sympathizing friend stepped out of the carriage, and, as the train started, he waved an odd kind of farewell greeting, as if he were threatening him with his fists.

In the carriage were a number of poor people, Jews, women with enormously wide cloaks, who had elbowed their way to their seats, and sat chattering or smoking.

The student stood up and looked out of the window without seeing. Lines of sparks like living fire passed by the grimy window-pane, and

balls of vapour and smoke, resembling large tufts of wool, were dashed to pieces and hurried to the ground by the wind. The smoke curled round the small shrubs growing close to the ground, moistened by the rain in the valley. The dusk of the autumn day spread a dim light over the landscape, and produced an effect of indescribable melancholy. Poor boy! Poor boy!

The loneliness of boundless sorrow was expressed in his weary look as he gazed out of the window. I knew that the pivot on which all his emotions turned was the anxiety of uncertainty, and that beyond the bounds of conscious thought an unknown loom was weaving for him a shadowy thread of hope. He saw, he heard nothing, while his vacant eyes followed the balls of smoke. As the train travelled along, I knew that he was miserable, tired out, that he would have liked to cry quietly. The thread of hope wound itself round his heart: Who could tell? perhaps his father was recovering, perhaps all would be well?

Suddenly (I knew it would come), the blood rushed from his face, his lips went pale and tightened; he was gazing into the far distance with wide-open eyes. It was as if a threatening hand, piercing the grief, loneliness and dread that weighed on him, was pointing at him, as if the wind were rousing him with the cry: 'Beware!' His thread of hope was strained to breaking-point, and the naked truth, which he had not quite faced till that minute, struck him through the heart like a sword.

Had I approached him at that instant, and told him I was an omniscient spirit and knew his village

well, and that his father was not lying dead, he would have fallen at my feet and believed, and I should have done him an infinite kindness.

But I did not speak to him, and I did not take his hand. All I wished to do was merely to watch him with the interest and insatiable curiosity which the human heart ever arouses in me.

'Let my fate go whither it listeth.'
(*Oedipus Tyrannus.*)

In the darkest corner of the ward, in the bed marked number twenty-four, a farm labourer of about thirty years of age had been lying for several months. A black wooden tablet, bearing the words 'Caries tuberculosa', hung at the head of the bed, and shook at each movement of the patient. The poor fellow's leg had had to be amputated above the knee, the result of a tubercular decay of the bone. He was a peasant, a potato-grower, and his forefathers had grown potatoes before him. He was now on his own, after having been in two situations; had been married for three years and had a baby son with a tuft of flaxen hair. Then suddenly, from no cause that he could tell, his knee had pained him, and small ulcers had formed. He had afforded himself a carriage to the town, and there he had been handed over to the hospital at the expense of the parish.

He remembered distinctly how on that autumn afternoon he had driven in the splendid, cushioned carriage with his young wife, how they had both wept with fright and grief, and when they had finished crying had eaten hard-boiled eggs: but

what had happened after that had all become blurred—indescribably misty. Yet only partially so.

Of the days in the hospital with their routine and monotony, creating an incomprehensible break in his life, his memory retained nothing; but the unchanging grief, weighing like a slab of stone on a grave, was ever present in his soul with inexorable and brutal force during these many months. He only half recalled the strange wonders that had been worked on him: bathing, feeding, probing into the wound, and later on the operation. He had been carried into a room full of gentlemen wearing aprons spotted with blood; he was conscious also of the mysterious, intrepid courage which, like a merciful hand, had supported him from that hour.

After having gazed at the awe-inspiring phenomena which surrounded him in the semicircle of the hospital theatre, he had slept during the operation. His simple heart had not worked out the lesson which sleep, the greatest mistress on earth, teaches. After the operation everything had been veiled by mortal lassitude. This had continued, but in the afternoon and at night they had mixed something heavy, like a stone ball, into his drinking-cup, and waves of warmth had flowed to the toes of his healthy foot from the cup. Thoughts chased one another swiftly, like tiny quicksilver balls through some corner of his brain, and while he lay bathed in perspiration, and his eyelids closed of their own accord, not in sleep but in unconsciousness, he had been pursued by strange, half-waking visions.

Everything real seemed to disappear, only dimly lighted, vacant space remained, pervaded by the

smell of chloroform. He seemed to be in the interior of a huge cone, stretching along the ground like a tunnel. Far away in the distance, where it narrowed towards the opening, there was a sparkling, white spot; if he could get there, he might escape. He seemed to be travelling day and night towards that chink along unending spiral lines running within the surface of the tunnel; he travelled under compulsion and with great effort, slowly, like a snail, although within him something leapt up like a rabbit caught in a snare, or as if wings were fluttering in his soul. He knew what was beyond that chink. Only a few steps would lead him to the ridge under the wood . . . to his own four strips of potato-field! And whenever he roused himself mechanically from his apathy he had a vision of the potato-harvest. The transparent autumn-haze in the fields was bringing objects that were far off into relief, and making them appear perfectly distinct. He saw himself together with his young wife, digging beautiful potatoes, large as their fists.

On the hillock, amid the stubble, the herdsmen were assembled in groups, their wallets slung round them; they were crouching on their heels, had collected dry juniper and lighted a fire; with bits of sticks they were scraping out the baked potatoes from the ashes. The rising smoke scented the air fragrantly with juniper.

At times, when he was better and more himself, when the fever tormented him less, he sank into the state of timidity and apprehension known only to those harassed almost beyond human endurance and to the dying. Fear oppressed him till his whole being shrank into something less than the

smallest grain; he was hurled by fearful sounds and overawing obsessions into a bottomless abyss.

At last the wound on his foot began to heal, and the fever to abate. His mind returned from that other world to the familiar one, and to reflecting on what was taking place before his eyes. But the nature of these reflections had changed. Formerly he had felt self-pity arising from terror; now it was the wild hatred of the wounded man, his overpowering desire for revenge; his rage turned as fiercely even upon the unfortunate ones lying beside him as upon those who had maimed him. But another idea had taken even more powerfully possession of his mind; his thoughts darted forward like a pack of hounds on the trail, in frantic pursuit of the power which had thus passed sentence on him.

This condition of lonely self-torment lasted a long while, and increased his exasperation.

And then, one day, he noticed that his healthy foot was growing stiff and the ankle swelling. When the head-surgeon came on his daily rounds, the patient confided his fear to him. The doctor examined the emaciated limb, unobserved lanced the abscess, perceived that the probe reached to the bone, rubbed his hands together and looked into the peasant's face with a sad, doubtful look.

'This is a bad job, my good fellow. It may mean the other foot; was that what you were thinking of? And you are a bad subject. But we will do it for you here; you will be better off than in your cottage, we will give you plenty to eat.' And he passed on, accompanied by his assistant. At the door he turned back, bent over the sick man, and

furtively, so that no one should see, passed his hand kindly over his head.

The peasant's mind became a blank ; it was as if someone had unawares dealt him a blow in the dark with a club. He closed his eyes and lay still for a long time . . . until an unknown feeling of calm came over him.

There is an enchanted, hidden spot in the human soul, fastened with seven locks, which no one and nothing but that picklock, bitter adversity, can open.

Through the lips of the self-blinded Oedipus, Sophocles makes mention of this secret place. Within it are hidden marvellous joy, sweet necessity, the highest wisdom.

As the poor fellow lay silently on his bed, the special conception that arose in his mind was that of Christ walking on the waves of the raging sea, quelling the storm.

Henceforward through long nights and wretched days he was looking at everything from an immeasurable distance, from a safe place, where all was calm and wholly well, whence everything seemed small, slightly ludicrous and foolish, and yet lovable.

' And may the Lord Jesus . . . may He give His peace to all people,' he whispered to himself. ' Never mind, this will do as well for me ! '

A POLISH SCENE

BY

WŁADYSŁAW ST. REYMONT[1]

[The place is a solitary inn in Russian Poland, near the Prussian frontier, kept by a Jew named Herszlik, part of whose occupation is to smuggle emigrants for America by night across the border. Besides emigrants and Herszlik are present an old beggar man and his wife or 'doxy', a couple of peasants drinking together, and Jan (or, in diminutive form, Jasiek), a youth who has just escaped from a prison to which he had been sentenced for an attack, under great provocation, on a steward, and now creeps into the inn out of the surrounding forest.]

It was a night of March, a night of rain, cold, and tempest.

The forest, cramped, stiff, soaked to its marrow, and agitated now and then by an icy shiver, threw out its boughs in a sort of feverish panic as if to shake the water from them, and roared the wild note of a creature in torture. At times a damp snow stilled all to helpless silence, broken by a passing groan or the cry of some frozen bird or rattle of some body falling on the boughs. Then once more the wind flung itself with fury on the woods, dug into their depths with its teeth, tore off boughs, and with a roar of triumph whistled

[1] The stroke softens the l approximately to the sound of w.

along the glades and swept the forest as with a besom ; or from out of the depths of space huge mud-coloured clouds, like piles of rotting hay, strangled the trees in their embrace, or dissolved in a cold unceasing drizzle that might have penetrated a stone. The roads were deserted, flooded with a mixture of mud and foul snow ; the villages seemed dead, the fields shrivelled, the rivers ice-fettered ; man and life were to be seen nowhere ; night ruled alone.

Only in the single inn of Przylecki shone a small light ; it stood in the middle of the forest at cross roads ; a few cottages were visible on the side of a hill : the rest was the mighty forest.

Jasiek Winciorek pushed forward cautiously from the wood to the road, and at sight of the blinking light walked stealthily to the window, peeped in, then in timid perplexity drew back a few steps till a fresh blast of wind froze him so that the poor boy turned back once more, crossed himself, and entered.

The inn was large, with a floor of clay, and a black ceiling resting on walls out of the perpendicular ; these had lost their whitewash, and were pierced by two small windows half-choked up with straw. Directly opposite the latter, behind a wooden railing, stood a cask resting on other barrels, above which smoked the red glare of a naphtha lamp. Over the room lay a dense darkness, only lightened now and then with flashes from an expiring fire in a large old-world fire-place, before which sat a pair of beggars. In a corner might be seen a number of persons huddled together whispering mysteriously. By the cask were two peasants, one clasping a bottle, the other

holding out a glass; they often drank healths to one another and nodded sleepily. A fat red damsel was snoring behind the railing. Over all there spread a smell compounded of whisky, sodden clay, and soaked rags.

At times such a stillness fell on the room that one could hear the sounds of the forest, the tinkle of the rain on the window-panes, the crackling of the pine boughs in the fireplace. And then a low door behind the railing opened with a creak, and there appeared the old grey head of a Jew, dressed in his praying gown, and singing in a low voice, while behind him shone a room lighted with small candles, from which issued Sabbath smells and a quiet monotonous dreary sound of singing.

Jasiek drank a few glasses one after the other, gnawed half-consciously some mouldy rolls as tough as leather, which he seasoned with a herring, and looked now at the door, now at the window, or listened to the murmur of the voices.

'Marry, no, curse it, I won't marry!' suddenly shouted one of the two peasants, knocking his bottle on the cask and spitting as far as the shoulder of the beggar man at the fire.

'But you must,' whispered the other, 'or repay the money.'

'God! that 's nothing! Jevka!'—this to the girl—'half a pint of whisky! I pay!'

'Money is a big thing, though a woman is a bigger.'

'No, curse it, I won't marry! I'll sell myself, borrow, pay back the money, rather than marry that harridan.'

'Just take a drop to my health, Antek: I have something to say to you.'

'You won't get round me. I have said no, and that is no. Why, if I must, I will run away to Brazil or the end of the world with those folk yonder!'

'Silly! just take a drop to my health, Antek: I have something to say to you.'

They drank healths to one another several times, then began kissing, then fell silent, for a child was crying in a corner, and a movement began among the quiet timid crowd.

A tall dried-up peasant appeared out of the darkness and walked out of the inn.

Jasiek moved up to the fire, for the cold was in his bones, and putting his herring on a stick began to toast it over the coals. 'Move up a bit,' he whispered to the beggar man, who had his feet on his wallet, and though quite blind, was drying at the fire the soaked strips he wore round his legs, and talking endlessly in a low voice to the woman by him; she was cooking something and arranging boughs under a tripod on which stood a pot.

Jasiek got warmer, and steam as from a bucket of boiling water went up from his long coat.

'You are badly soaked,' whispered the beggar, sniffing.

'I am,' said Jasiek in a whisper, shivering. The door creaked, but it was only the thin peasant returning.

'Who is that?' whispered Jasiek, tapping the beggar on the arm.

'Those? I don't know him; but those are silly fools going to Brazil.' He spat.

Jasiek said not a word, but went on drying himself and moving his eyes about the room, where the people, apparently grown uneasy, now

talked with increasing loudness, now fell suddenly silent, while every moment one of them went out of the inn, and returned immediately.

From the inner room the monotonous chant still reached them. A hungry dog crept out from nowhere to the fire and began to growl at the beggars, but getting a blow from a stick he howled with pain, settled himself in the middle of the room, and with a piteous look gazed at the steam rising from the pot.

Jasiek was getting warmer; he had eaten his herring and rolls, but still felt more sharply than ever that he wanted something. He minutely searched his pockets, but not finding even a farthing there, doubled himself together and gazed idly at the pot and the beams of the fire.

'You want to eat—eh?' asked the beggar woman presently.

'I have . . . a small rumbling in my belly.'

'Who is it?' the beggar man softly inquired of the woman.

'Don't be afraid,' she growled with malice: 'he won't give you a threepenny bit, not so much as a farthing.'

'A farmer?'

'Yes, a farmer, like you: one who goes about the world'—and she took the pot off the tripod.

'And there are good people in the world—and wild beasts—and pigs out of sties. . . . Hey?' said the beggar man, poking Jasiek with his stick.

'Yes, yes,' answered the boy, not knowing what he said.

'You have something on your mind, I see,' whispered the beggar.

'I have.'

'The Lord Jesus always said: "If you are hungry, eat; if you are thirsty, drink; but if you are in trouble, don't chatter."'

'Eat a little,' the woman begged the boy; 'it is beggars' food, but it will do you good,' and she poured out a liberal portion on a plate. From the bag she drew out a piece of brown bread and put it in the soup unnoticed; then as he moved up to eat and she saw his worn grey face, mere skin and bone, pity so moved her that she took out a piece of sausage and laid it on the bread.

Jasiek could not resist but ate greedily, from time to time throwing a bone to the dog, who had crept up with entreating eyes.

The beggar man listened a long time; then, when the woman put the pot into his hands, he raised his spoon and said solemnly:

'Eat, man. The Lord Jesus said, give a beggar a farthing and another shall repay thee ten. God be with you!'

They ate in silence, till in an interval the beggar rubbed his mouth with his cuff and said:

'Three things are needful for food to do you good—spirit, salt, bread. Give us spirit, woman!'

All three drank together and then went on eating.

Jasiek had almost forgotten his danger and threw no more timid looks around. He just ate, sated himself with warmth, sated slowly the four-days' hunger that gnawed him, and felt peaceful in the quietness.

The two peasants had left the cask, but the crowd in the corner on benches or with their bags under their heads on the wet floor were still quietly dreaming; and still came, but in ever sleepier

tones, the sound of singing from the inner room. And the rain was still falling and penetrating the roof in some places; it dripped from the ceiling and formed shining sticky circles of mud on the clay floor. And still at times the wind shook the inn or howled in the fire-place, scattered the burning boughs and drove smoke into the room.

'There is something for you too, vagabond!' whispered the woman, giving the rest of the food to the dog, who flitted about them with beseeching eyes.

Then the beggar spoke. 'With food in his belly a man is not badly off, even in hell,' he said, setting down the empty pot.

'God repay you for feeding me!' said Jasiek, and squeezed the beggar's hand; the other did not at once let him go, but felt his hand carefully.

'For a few years you have not worked with your hands,' he murmured; but Jan tore his hand away in a fright.

'Sit down,' continued the beggar, 'don't be afraid. The Lord Jesus said: "All are just men who fear God and help the poor orphan." Fear not, man. I am no Judas nor Jew, but an honest Christian and a poor orphan myself.'

He thought for a moment, then in a quiet voice said:

'Attend to three things: love the Lord Jesus, never be hungry, and give to a man more unfortunate than yourself. All the rest is just nothing, rotten fancies. A wise man should never vex himself uselessly. Ho! we know a dozen things. Eh, what do you say?'

He pricked up his ears and waited, but Jasiek remained stubbornly silent, fearing to betray him-

self; then the beggar brought out his bark snuff-box, tapped it with his finger, took snuff, sneezed, and handed it to the boy. Then, bending his huge blind face over the fire, he began to talk in low monotonous tones.

'There is no justice in the world; all men are Pharisees and rogues; one man pushes another in front of him out of the way; each tries to be the first to cheat the other, to eat him up. That wasn't the will of the Lord Jesus. Ho! go into a squire's house, take off your cap, and sing, though your throat is bursting, about Jesus and Mary and all the Saints; then wait—nothing comes. Put in a few prayers about the Lord's Transfiguration; then wait. Nothing again. No, only the small dogs whine about your wallet and the maids bustle behind the hedges. Add a litany—perhaps they give you two farthings or a mouldy bit of bread. Curse you! I wish you were dirty, half-blind, and had to ask even beggars for help! Why, after all that praying the whisky to wash my throat with costs me more than they give!' He spat with disgust.

'But are others better off, eh?' he continued, after a sniff. 'Jantek Kulik—I dare say you know him—took a little pig of a squire's. And what enjoyment did he have of it? Precious little. It was a miserable creature, like a small yard dog; you could drown the whole body of him in a quart of whisky. Well, for that he was arrested and put in prison for half a year—and for what? for a miserable pig! as if a pig weren't one of God's creatures too, and some were meant to die of hunger, and some to have more than they can stuff into their throats. And yet the Lord Jesus said: "What a poor man takes, that is as if you had

given it for My sake." Amen. Won't you take a drink?'

'God repay you, but it has already turned my head a bit!'

'Silly! the Lord Jesus himself drank at feasts. Drinking is no sin; it is a sin, sure enough, to swill like a pig or to sit without talking when good folk are gossiping, but not to drink the gift of God to the bottom. You just drink my health,' he whispered resolutely.

He drank himself from the bottle with a long gurgle in his throat; then handing it to Jasiek, said merrily:

'Drink, orphan. Observe only three things—to work the whole week, to say your Paternoster, and on Sunday to give to the unfortunate, and then you shall have redemption for your soul. Man, if you can't drink a gallon, drink a quart!'

Thereupon all fell silent. The woman was sleeping with her head drooping by the extinct flame, the man had opened wide his cataract-covered eyes at the glowing coals, and once and again nodded vigorously. In the corner the whispers were silent; only the wind struck the panes more violently than ever and shook the door, and from the inner room burst forth the voices in an ecstasy, it seemed, of pity or despair.

Jasiek, overcome by the warmth of the whisky, felt sleepy, stretched his legs out towards the fire, and felt an irresistible desire to lie down. He fought against it with energetic movements, but every now and then became utterly stiff and remembered nothing. A pleasant warm mist compounded out of the beams of the fire, kindly words, and stillness, wrapped him in darkness and a deep

sense of freedom and security. At times he woke suddenly, he could not have said why, glanced over the room, or listened for a moment to the beggar, who was asleep but still muttered : ' For all souls in Purgatory—Ave Maria, gratia plena,' and then, ' Man, I tell you that a good beggar should have a stick with a point, a deep wallet, and a long Paternoster.' Here he woke up, and feeling Jasiek's eyes on him, recovered his wits and began to speak :

' Hear what an old man says. Take a drop to my health, and listen. Man, I tell you, be prudent, but don't force it into any one's eyes. Note everything, and yet be blind to everything. If you live with a fool, be a greater fool ; with a lame man, have no legs at all ; with a sick man, die for him. If men give you a farthing, thank them as if it were a bit of silver ; if they set dogs on you, take it as your offering to the Lord Jesus ; if they beat you with a stick, say your Paternoster.

' Man, I tell you, do as I advise and you shall have your wallet full, your belly like a mountain, and you shall lead the whole world in a string like silly cattle. . . . Eh, eh, I am a man not born to-day but one that knows a dozen things. He that can observe the way of the world, no trouble shall come to him. At the squire's house take your revenge on the peasants ; that is a sure farthing and perhaps a morsel from the dinner ; at the priest's abuse the peasants and the squires ; that is two farthings sure, and absolution too ; and when you are in the cottages, abuse everything, and you will eat millet and bacon, and drink whisky mixed with fat.'

Here he began to drowse, still murmuring in-

coherently, 'Man, I tell you . . . for the soul of Julina . . . Ave Maria . . .', and rocked on the bench.

'Gratia plena . . . help a poor cripple!' This was the woman babbling in her sleep, as she raised her head from the fire-place; but the man woke up suddenly and cried, 'Be quiet, silly!' for the entrance door was thrown loudly open, and there pushed in among them a tall yellow-haired Jew.

'On to the road,' he called in a deep voice, 'it's time'; and at once the whole crowd of sleepers sprang to their feet, began to put their loads on their backs, to get ready, to push forward into the middle of the room and again for no reason to retire. A low tumult of sound—abuse or complaint—burst from all: there were hot passages of words, cries, curses, gesticulations, or the beginnings of muttered prayers, noise, and crying children—but all kept under restraint, and yet filling the gloomy blackened room with a sense of alarm.

Jasiek awoke completely, and with his shoulders pressed to the now cooling fireplace, looked round curiously at the people as far as he could make them out.

'Where are they going?' he asked the beggar.

'To Brazil.'

'Is it far?'

'Ho! ho! it's the end of the world, beyond the tenth sea.'

'And why?'

'First because they are fools, and second because they are unfortunate.'

'And do they know the way?' Jasiek asked again, hugely astonished.

But the beggar was no longer answering him;

pushing on the woman with a stick, he came forward into the middle of the room, fell on his knees, and began in a sort of plaintive chant :

'You are going beyond the seas, the mountains, the forests—to the end of the world. The Lord Jesus bless you, orphans ! The Virgin of Czenstochowa keep you, and all the saints help you in return for the farthing that you give to this poor cripple. . . . To the Lord's Transfiguration ! Ave Maria. . . .'

'Gratia plena : the Lord be with you,' murmured the woman, kneeling at his side.

'Blessed art thou among women,' answered the crowd and pressed forward.

All knelt ; a subdued sobbing arose ; heads were bowed ; trusting and resigned hearts breathed their emotions in prayer. A warm glow of trust kindled the dull eyes and pinched faces, straightened the bent shoulders, and gave them such force that they rose from their prayer heartened and unconquerable.

'Herszlik, Herszlik !' they called to the Jew, who had disappeared into the inner room. They were eager now to go into that unknown world, so terrible and yet so alluring for its very strangeness ; eager to take on their shoulders their new fate and to escape from the old.

Herszlik came out armed with a dark lantern, counted the people, made them range themselves in pairs, opened the door : they began to move like some phantom army of misery, a column of ragged shadows, and disappeared at once in the darkness and rain. For a moment there shone in the gloom and amid the tossing trees the solitary light of their guide, for a moment one could hear

amid wailing a tremulous hymn, 'He who casts himself on the care of the Lord. . . .' Then the storm broke out again in what seemed like the groan of dying masses.

'Poor creatures! orphans!' whispered Jasiek; a wild grief filled his heart.

Then he returned to the inn, now dumb and dark, for the girl had extinguished the light and gone to sleep, and the singing had ceased in the inner room: only the beggar remained awake; he and the woman were counting the people's alms.

'A poor parish! two threepenny bits and five and twenty farthings—the whole show! Ha! May the Lord Jesus never remember them or help them!'

He went on babbling, but Jasiek no longer listened. Crouched in the fire-place he hid himself as best he could in his still wet cloak and fell into a stony sleep.

A good while after midnight he was awakened by a sharp tug; a light shone straight into his eyes.

'Hey, brother, get up! Who are you? Have you your passport?'

He came to his senses at once: two policemen stood over him.

'Have you your passport?' the policeman asked again, shaking him like a bundle of straw.

But for answer Jasiek jumped to his feet and struck the man with his fist between the eyes, so that he dropped his lantern and fell backwards, while Jasiek darted to the door and ran out. The other policeman chased him, and being unable to catch him, fired.

Jasiek tottered a moment, shrieked, and fell in the mud, then jumped up at once and was lost in the darkness of the forest.

DEATH

BY

WŁADYSŁAW ST. REYMONT

'FATHER, eh, father, get up, do you hear?—Eh, get a move on!'

'Oh God, oh Blessed Virgin! Aoh!' groaned the old man, who was being violently shaken. His face peeped out from under his sheepskin, a sunken, battered, and deeply-lined face, of the same colour as the earth he had tilled for so many years; with a shock of hair, grey as the furrows of ploughed fields in autumn. His eyes were closed; breathing heavily he dropped his tongue from his half-open bluish mouth with cracked lips.

'Get up! hi!' shouted his daughter.

'Grandad!' whimpered a little girl who stood in her chemise and a cotton apron tied across her chest, and raised herself on tiptoe to look at the old man's face.

'Grandad!' There were tears in her blue eyes and sorrow in her grimy little face. 'Grandad!' she called out once more, and plucked at the pillow.

'Shut up!' screamed her mother, took her by the nape of the neck and thrust her against the stove.

'Out with you, damned dog!' she roared, when she stumbled over the old half-blind bitch who was sniffing the bed. 'Out you go! will you . . .

you carrion!' and she kicked the animal so violently with her clog that it tumbled over, and, whining, crept towards the closed door. The little girl stood sobbing near the stove, and rubbed her nose and eyes with her small fists.

'Father, get up while I am still in a good humour!'

The sick man was silent, his head had fallen on one side, his breathing became more and more laboured. He had not much longer to live.

'Get up. What 's the idea? Do you think you are going to do your dying here? Not if I know it! Go to Julina, you old dog! You've given the property to Julina, let her look after you . . . come now . . . while I'm yet asking you!'

'Oh blessed Child Jesus! oh Mary . . .'

A sudden spasm contracted his face, wet with anxiety and sweat. With a jerk his daughter tore away the feather-bed, and, taking the old man round the middle, she pulled him furiously half out of the bed, so that only his head and shoulders were resting on it; he lay motionless like a piece of wood, and, like a piece of wood, stiff and dried up.

'Priest . . . His Reverence . . .' he murmured under his heavy breathing.

'I'll give you your priest! You shall kick your bucket in the pigsty, you sinner . . . like a dog!' She seized him under the armpits, but dropped him again directly, and covered him entirely with the feather-bed, for she had noticed a shadow flitting past the window. Some one was coming up to the house.

She scarcely had time to push the old man's feet back into the bed. Blue in the face, she furiously

banged the feather-bed and pushed the bedding about.

The wife of the peasant Dyziak came into the room.

'Christ be praised.'

'In Eternity . . .' growled the other, and glanced suspiciously at her out|of the corners of her eyes.

'How do you do? Are you well?'

'Thank God . . . so so . . .'

'How 's the old man? Well?'

She was stamping the snow off her clogs near the door.

'Eh . . . how should he be well? He can hardly fetch his breath any more.'

'Neighbour . . . you don't say so . . . neighbour . . .' She was bending down over the old man.

'Priest,' he sighed.

'Dear me . . . just fancy . . . dear me, he doesn't know me! The poor man wants the priest. He 's dying, that 's certain, he 's all but dead already . . . dear me! Well, and did you send for his Reverence?'

'Have I got any one to send?'

'But you don't mean to let a Christian soul die without the sacrament?'

'I can't run off and leave him alone, and perhaps . . . he may recover.'

'Don't you believe it . . . hoho . . . just listen to his breathing. That means that his inside is withering up. It 's just as it was with my Walek last year when he was so ill.'

'Well, dear, you'd better go for the priest, make haste . . . look!'

'All right, all right. Poor thing! He looks as

if he couldn't last much longer. I must make haste . . . I'm off . . .' and she tied her apron more firmly over her head.

'Good-bye, Antkowa.'

'Go with God.'

Dyziakowa went out, while the other woman began to put the room in order; she scraped the dirt off the floor, swept it up, strewed wood-ashes, scrubbed her pots and pans and put them in a row. From time to time she turned a look of hatred on to the bed, spat, clenched her fists, and held her head in helpless despair.

'Fifteen acres of land, the pigs, three cows, furniture, clothes—half of it, I'm sure, would come to six thousand . . . good God!'

And as though the thought of so large a sum was giving her fresh vigour, she scrubbed her saucepans with a fury that made the walls ring, and banged them down on the board.

'May you . . . may you!' She continued to count up: 'Fowls, geese, calves, all the farm implements. And all left to that trull! May misery eat you up . . . may the worms devour you in the ditch for the wrong you have done me, and for leaving me no better off than an orphan!'

She sprang towards the bed in a towering rage and shouted:

'Get up!' And when the old man did not move, she threatened him with her fists and screamed into his face:

'That 's what you've come here for, to do your dying here, and I am to pay for your funeral and buy you a hooded cloak . . . that 's what he thinks. I don't think! You won't live to see me do it! If your Julina is so sweet, you'd better make haste

and go to her. Was it I who was supposed to look after you in your dotage? She is the pet, and if you think . . .'

She did not finish, for she heard the tinkling of the bell, and the priest entered with the sacrament.

Antkowa bowed down to his feet, wiping tears of rage from her eyes, and after she had poured the holy water into a chipped basin and put the asperges-brush beside it, she went out into the passage, where a few people who had come with the priest were waiting already.

'Christ be praised.'

'In Eternity.'

'What is it?'

'Oh nothing! Only that he 's come here to give up . . . with us, whom he has wronged. And now he won't give up. Oh dear me . . . poor me!'

She began to cry.

'That 's true! He will have to rot, and you will have to live,' they all answered in unison and nodded their heads.

'One's own father,' she began again. '. . . Have we, Antek and I, not taken care of him, worked for him, sweated for him, just as much as they? Not a single egg would I sell, not half a pound of butter, but put it all down his throat; the little drop of milk I have taken away from the baby and given it to him, because he was an old man and my father . . . and now he goes and gives it all to Tomek. Fifteen acres of land, the cottage, the cows, the pigs, the calf, and the farm-carts and all the furniture . . . is that nothing? Oh, pity me! There 's no justice in this world, none . . . Oh, oh!'

She leant against the wall, sobbing loudly.

'Don't cry, neighbour, don't cry. God is full of mercy, but not always towards the poor. He will reward you some day.'

'Idiot, what 's the good of talking like that ?' interrupted the speaker's husband. 'What 's wrong is wrong. The old man will go, and poverty will stay.'

'It 's hard to make an ox move when he won't lift up his feet,' another man said thoughtfully.

'Eh . . . You can get used to everything in time, even to hell,' murmured a third, and spat from between his teeth.

The little group relapsed into silence. The wind rattled the door and blew snow through the crevices on to the floor. The peasants stood thoughtfully, with bared heads, and stamped their feet to get warm. The women, with their hands under their cotton aprons, and huddled together, looked with patient resigned faces towards the door of the living-room.

At last the bell summoned them into the room; they entered one by one, pushing each other aside. The dying man was lying on his back, his head deeply buried in the pillows; his yellow chest, covered with white hair, showed under the open shirt. The priest bent over him and laid the wafer upon his outstretched tongue. All knelt down and, with their eyes raised to the ceiling, violently smote their chests, while they sighed and sniffled audibly. The women bent down to the ground and babbled: 'Lamb of God that takest away the sins of the world.'

The dog, worried by the frequent tinkling of the bell, growled ill-temperedly in the corner.

The priest had finished the last unction, and beckoned to the dying man's daughter.

'Where 's yours, Antkowa ?'

'Where should he be, your Reverence, if not at his daily job ?'

For a moment the priest stood, hesitating, looked at the assembly, pulled his expensive fur tighter round his shoulders; but he could not think of anything suitable to say; so he only nodded to them and went out, giving them his white, aristocratic hand to kiss, while they bent towards his knees.

When he had gone they immediately dispersed. The short December day was drawing to its close. The wind had gone down, but the snow was now falling in large, thick flakes. The evening twilight crept into the room. Antkowa was sitting in front of the fire; she broke off twig after twig of the dry firewood, and carelessly threw them upon the fire.

She seemed to be purposing something, for she glanced again and again at the window, and then at the bed. The sick man had been lying quite still for a considerable time. She got very impatient, jumped up from her stool and stood still, eagerly listening and looking about; then she sat down again.

Night was falling fast. It was almost quite dark in the room. The little girl was dozing, curled up near the stove. The fire was flickering feebly with a reddish light which lighted up the woman's knees and a bit of the floor.

The dog started whining and scratched at the door. The chickens on the ladder cackled low and long.

Now a deep silence reigned in the room. A damp chill rose from the wet floor.

Antkowa suddenly got up to peer through the window at the village street; it was empty. The snow was falling thickly, blotting out everything at a few steps' distance. Undecided, she paused in front of the bed, but only for a moment; then she suddenly pulled away the feather-bed roughly and determinedly, and threw it on to the other bedstead. She took the dying man under the armpits and lifted him high up.

'Magda! Open the door.'

Magda jumped up, frightened, and opened the door.

'Come here . . . take hold of his feet.'

Magda clutched at her grandfather's feet with her small hands and looked up in expectation.

'Well, get on . . . help me to carry him! Don't stare about . . . carry him, that 's what you've got to do!' she commanded again, severely.

The old man was heavy, perfectly helpless, and apparently unconscious; he did not seem to realize what was being done to him. She held him tight and carried, or rather dragged him along, for the little girl had stumbled over the threshold and dropped his feet, which were drawing two deep furrows in the snow.

The penetrating cold had restored the dying man to consciousness, for in the yard he began to moan and utter broken words:

'Julisha . . . oh God . . . Ju . . .'

'That 's right, you scream . . . scream as much as you like, nobody will hear you, even if you shout your mouth off!'

She dragged him across the yard, opened the door of the pigsty with her foot, pulled him in, and dropped him close to the wall.

The sow came forward, grunting, followed by her piglets.

'Malusha! malu, malu, malu!'

The pigs came out of the sty and she banged the door, but returned almost immediately, tore the shirt open on the old man's chest, tore off his chaplet, and took it with her.

'Now die, you leper!'

She kicked his naked leg, which was lying across the opening, with her clog, and went out.

The pigs were running about in the yard; she looked back at them from the passage.

'Malusha! malu, malu, malu!'

The pigs came running up to her, squeaking; she brought out a bowlfull of potatoes and emptied it. The mother-pig began to eat greedily, and the piglets poked their pink noses into her and pulled at her until nothing but their loud smacking could be heard.

Antkowa lighted a small lamp above the fireplace and tore open the chaplet, with her back turned towards the window. A sudden gleam came into her eyes, when a number of banknotes and two silver roubles fell out.

'It wasn't just talk then, his saying that he'd put by the money for the funeral.' She wrapped the money up in a rag and put it into the chest.

'You Judas! May eternal blindness strike you!'

She put the pots and pans straight and tried to cheer the fire which was going out.

'Drat it! That plague of a boy has left me without a drop of water.'

She stepped outside and called 'Ignatz! Hi! Ignatz!'

A good half-hour passed, then the snow creaked under stealthy footsteps and a shadow stole past the window. Antkowa seized a piece of wood and stood by the door which was flung wide open; a small boy of about nine entered the room.

'You stinking idler! Running about the village, are you? And not a drop of water in the house!'

Clutching him with one hand she beat the screaming child with the other.

'Mummy! I won't do it again. . . . Mummy, leave off. . . . Mumm . . .'

She beat him long and hard, giving vent to all her pent-up rage.

'Mother! Ow! All ye Saints! She 's killing me!'

'You dog! You're loafing about, and not a drop of water do you fetch me, and there 's no wood . . . am I to feed you for nothing, and you worrying me into the bargain?' She hit harder.

At last he tore himself away, jumped out by the window, and shouted back at her with a tear-choked voice:

'May your paws rot off to the elbows, you dog of a mother! May you be stricken down, you sow! . . . You may wait till you're manure before I fetch you any water!'

And he ran back to the village.

The room suddenly seemed strangely empty. The lamp above the fireplace trembled feebly. The little girl was sobbing to herself.

'What are you snivelling about?'

'Mummy . . . oh . . . oh . . . grandad . . .'

She leant, weeping, against her mother's knee.

'Leave off, idiot!'

She took the child on her lap, and, pressing her

close, she began to clean her head. The little thing babbled incoherently, she looked feverish; she rubbed her eyes with her small fists and presently went to sleep, still sobbing convulsively from time to time.

Soon afterwards the husband returned home. He was a huge fellow in a sheepskin, and wore a muffler round his cap. His face was blue with cold; his moustache, covered with hoar-frost, looked like a brush. He knocked the snow off his boots, took muffler and cap off together, dusted the snow off his fur, clapped his stiff hands against his arms, pushed the bench towards the fire, and sat down heavily.

Antkowa took a saucepan full of cabbage off the fire and put it in front of her husband, cut a piece of bread and gave it him, together with the spoon. The peasant ate in silence, but when he had finished he undid his fur, stretched his legs, and said: 'Is there any more?'

She gave him the remains of their midday porridge; he spooned it up after he had cut himself another piece of bread; then he took out his pouch, rolled a cigarette and lighted it, threw some sticks on the fire and drew closer to it. A good while later he looked round the room. 'Where 's the old man?'

'Where should he be? In the pigsty.'

He looked questioningly at her.

'I should think so! What should he loll in the bed for, and dirty the bedclothes? If he 's got to give up, he will give up all the quicker in there. . . . Has he given me a single thing? What should he come to me for? Am I to pay for his funeral and give him his food? If he doesn't give up now—and

I tell you, he is a tough one—then he'll eat us out of house and home. If Julina is to have everything let her look after him—that 's nothing to do with me.'

' Isn't my father . . . and cheated us . . . he has. I don't care. . . . The old speculator ! '

Antek swallowed the smoke of his cigarette and spat into the middle of the room.

' If he hadn't cheated us we should now have . . . wait a minute . . . we've got five . . . and seven and a half . . . makes . . . five and . . . seven . . .'

' Twelve and a half. I had counted that up long ago ; we could have kept a horse and three cows . . . bah ! . . . the carrion ! '

Again he spat furiously.

The woman got up, laid the child down on the bed, took the little rag bundle from the chest and put it into her husband's hand.

' What 's that ? '

' Look at it.'

He opened the linen rag. An expression of greed came into his face, he bent forward towards the fire with his whole frame, so as to hide the money, and counted it over twice.

' How much is it ? '

She did not know the money values.

' Fifty-four roubles.'

' Lord ! So much ? '

Her eyes shone ; she stretched out her hand and fondled the money.

' How did you come by it ? '

' Ah bah . . . how ? Don't you remember the old man telling us last year that he had put by enough to pay for his funeral ? '

' That 's right, he did say that.'

'He had stitched it into his chaplet and I took it from him; holy things shouldn't knock about in a pigsty, that would be sinful; then I felt the silver through the linen, so I tore that off and took the money. That is ours; hasn't he wronged us enough?'

'That 's God's truth. It 's ours; that little bit at least is coming back to us. Put it by with the other money, we can just do with it. Only yesterday Smoletz told me he wanted to borrow a thousand roubles from me; he will give his five acres of ploughed fields near the forest as security.'

'Have you got enough?'

'I think I have.'

'And will you begin to sow the fields yourself in the spring?'

'Rather . . . if I shouldn't have quite enough now, I will sell the sow; even if I should have to sell the little ones as well I must lend him the money. For he won't be able to redeem it,' he added, 'I know what I know. We shall go to the lawyer and make a proper contract that the ground will be mine unless he repays the money within five years.'

'Can you do that?'

'Of course I can. How did Dumin get hold of Dyziak's fields? . . . Put it away; you may keep the silver, buy what you like with it. Where 's Ignatz?'

'He's run off somewhere. Ha! no water, it 's all gone. . . .'

The peasant got up without a word, looked after the cattle, went in and out, fetched water and wood.

The supper was boiling in the saucepan. Ignatz

cautiously crept into the room ; no one spoke to him. They were all silent and strangely ill at ease. The old man was not mentioned ; it was as if he had never been.

Antek thought of his five acres ; he looked upon them as a certainty. Momentarily the old man came into his mind, and then again the sow he had meant to kill when she had finished with the sucking-pigs. Again and again he spat when his eyes fell on the empty bedstead, as if he wanted to get rid of an unpleasant thought. He was worried, did not finish his supper, and went to bed immediately after. He turned over from side to side ; the potatoes and cabbage, groats and bread gave him indigestion, but he got over it and went to sleep.

When all was silent, Antkowa gently opened the door into the next room where the bundles of flax lay. From underneath these she fetched a packet of banknotes wrapped up in a linen rag, and added the money. She smoothed the notes many times over, opened them out, folded them up again, until she had gazed her fill ; then she put out the light and went to bed beside her husband.

Meanwhile the old man had died. The pigsty, a miserable lean-to run up of planks and thatched with branches, gave no protection against wind and weather. No one heard the helpless old man entreating for mercy in a voice trembling with despair. No one saw him creep to the closed door and raise himself with a superhuman effort to try and open it. He felt death gaining upon him ; from his heels it crept upwards to his chest, holding it as in a vice, and shaking him in terrible spasms ; his jaws closed upon each other, tighter and

tighter, until he was no longer able to open them and scream. His veins were hardening till they felt like wires. He reared up feebly, till at last he broke down on the threshold, with foam on his lips, and a look of horror at being left to die of cold, in his broken eyes; his face was distorted by an expression of anguish which was like a frozen cry. There he lay.

The next morning before dawn Antek and his wife got up. His first thought was to see what had happened to the old man.

He went to look, but could not get the door of the pigsty to open, the corpse was barring it from the inside like a beam. At last, after a great effort, he was able to open it far enough to slip in, but he came out again at once, terror-stricken. He could hardly get fast enough across the yard and into the house; he was almost senseless with fear. He could not understand what was happening to him; his whole frame shook as in a fever, and he stood by the door panting and unable to utter a word.

Antkowa was at that moment teaching little Magda her prayer. She turned her head towards her husband with questioning eyes.

'Thy will be done . . .' she babbled thoughtlessly.

'Thy will . . .'

'. . . be done . . .'

'. . . be done . . .' the kneeling child repeated like an echo.

'Well, is he dead?' she jerked out, '. . . on earth . . .'

'. . . on earth . . .'

'To be sure, he 's lying across the door,' he answered under his breath.

'. . . as it is in Heaven . . .'

'. . . is in Heaven . . .'

'But we can't leave him there; people might say we took him there to get rid of him—we can't have that . . .'

'What do you want me to do with him?'

'How do I know? You must do something.'

'Perhaps we can get him across here?' suggested Antek.

'Look at that now . . . let him rot! Bring him in here? Not if . . .'

'Idiot, he will have to be buried.'

'Are we to pay for his funeral? . . . but deliver us from evil . . . what are you blinking your silly eyes for? . . . go on praying.'

'. . . deliver . . . us . . . from . . . evil . . .'

'I shouldn't think of paying for that, that 's Tomek's business by law and right.'

'. . . Amen . . .'

'Amen.'

She made the sign of the cross over the child, wiped its nose with her fingers and went up to her husband.

He whispered: 'We must get him across.'

'Into the house . . . here?'

'Where else?'

'Into the cowshed; we can lead the calf out and lay him down on the bench, let him lie in state there, if he likes . . . such a one as he has been!'

'Monika!'

'Eh?'

'We ought to get him out there.'

'Well, fetch him out then.'

'All right . . . but . . .'

'You're afraid, what?'

'Idiot . . . damned . . .'

'What else?'

'It 's dark . . .'

'If you wait till it 's day, people will see you.'

'Let 's go together.'

'You go if you are so keen.'

'Are you coming, you carrion, or are you not?' he shouted at her; 'he 's your father, not mine.' And he flung out of the room in a rage.

The woman followed him without a word.

When they entered the pigsty, a breath of horror struck them, like the exhalation from a corpse. The old man was lying there, cold as ice; one half of his body had frozen on to the floor; they had to tear him off forcibly before they could drag him across the threshold and into the yard.

Antkowa began to tremble violently at the sight of him; he looked terrifying in the light of the grey dawn, on the white coverlet of snow, with his anguished face, wide-open eyes, and drooping tongue on which the teeth had closed firmly. There were blue patches on his skin, and he was covered with filth from head to foot.

'Take hold,' whispered the man, bending over him. 'How horribly cold he is!'

The icy wind which rises just before the sun, blew into their faces, and shook the snow off the swinging twigs with a dry crackle.

Here and there a star was still visible against the leaden background of the sky. From the village came the creaking noise of the hauling of water, and the cocks crew as if the weather were going to change.

Antkowa shut her eyes and covered her hands with her apron, before she took hold of the old man's feet; they could hardly lift him, he was so

heavy. They had barely put him down on a bench when she fled back into the house, throwing out a linen-rag to her husband to cover the corpse.

The children were busy scraping potatoes ; she waited impatiently at the door.

' Have done . . . come in ! . . . Lord, how long you are ! '

' We must get some one to come and wash him,' she said, laying the breakfast, when he had come in.

' I will fetch the deaf-mute.'

' Don't go to work to-day.'

' Go . . . no, not I . . .'

They did not speak again, and ate their breakfast without appetite, although as a rule they finished their four quarts of soup between them.

When they went out into the yard they walked quickly, and did not turn their heads towards the other side. They were worried, but did not know why ; they felt no remorse ; it was perhaps more a vague fear of the corpse, or fear of death, that shook them and made them silent.

When it was broad day, Antek fetched the village deaf-mute, who washed and dressed the old man, laid him out, and put a consecrated candle at his head.

Antek then went to give notice to the priest and to the Soltys of his father-in-law's death and his own inability to pay for the funeral.

' Let Tomek bury him ; he has got all the money.'

The news of the old man's death spread rapidly throughout the village. People soon began to assemble in little groups to look at the corpse. They murmured a prayer, shook their heads, and went off to talk it over.

It was not till towards evening that Tomek, the

other son-in-law, under pressure of public opinion, declared himself willing to pay for the funeral.

On the third day, shortly before this was to take place, Tomek's wife made her appearance at Antek's cottage.

In the passage she almost came nose to nose with her sister, who was just taking a pail of dish-water out to the cowshed.

'Blessed be Jesus Christ,' she murmured, and kept her hand on the door-handle.

'Now: look at that . . . soul of a Judas!' Antkowa put the pail down hard. 'She 's come to spy about here. Got rid of the old one somehow, didn't you? Hasn't he given everything to you . . . and you dare show yourself here, you trull! Have you come for the rest of the rags he left here, what?'

'I bought him a new sukmana at Whitsuntide, he can keep that on, of course, but I must have the sheepskin back, because it has been bought with money I have earned in the sweat of my brow,' Tomekowa replied calmly.

'Have it back, you mangy dog, have it back?' screamed Antkowa. 'I'll give it you, you'll see what you will have . . .' and she looked round for an object that would serve her purpose. 'Take it away? You dare! You have crawled to him and lickspittled till he became the idiot he was and made everything over to you and wronged me, and then . . .'

'Everybody knows that we bought the land from him, there are witnesses . . .'

'Bought it? Look at her! You mean to say you're not afraid to lie like that under God's living eyes? Bought it! Cheats, that 's what you are,

thieves, dogs! You stole the money from him first, and then. . . . Didn't you make him eat out of the pig-pail? Adam is a witness that he had to pick the potatoes out of the pig-pail, ha! You've let him sleep in the cowshed, because, you said, he stank so that you couldn't eat. Fifteen acres of land and a dower-life like that . . . for so much property! And you've beaten him too, you swine, you monkey!'

'Hold your snout, or I'll shut it for you and make you remember, you sow, you trull!'

'Come on then, come on, you destitute creature!'

'I . . . destitute?'

'Yes, you! You would have rotted in a ditch, the vermin would have eaten you up, if Tomek hadn't married you.'

'I, destitute? Oh you carrion!'

They sprang at each other, clutching at each other's hair; they fought in the narrow passage, screaming themselves hoarse all the time.

'You street-walker, you loafer . . . there! that 's one for you! There 's one for my fifteen acres, and for all the wrong you have done me, you dirty dog!'

'For the love of God, you women, leave off, leave off! It 's a sin and a shame!' cried the neighbours.

'Let me go, you leper, will you let go?'

'I'll beat you to death, I will tear you to pieces, you filth!'

They fell down, hitting each other indiscriminately, knocked over the pail, and rolled about in the pigwash. At last, speechless with rage and only breathing hard, they still banged away at each other. The men were hardly able to separate them. Purple in the face, scratched all over, and

covered with filth, they looked like witches. Their fury was boundless; they sprang at each other again, and had to be separated a second time.

At last Antkowa began to sob hysterically with rage and exhaustion, tore her own hair and wailed: 'Oh Jesus! Oh little child Jesus! Oh Mary! Look at this pestiferous woman . . . curse those heathen . . . oh! oh! . . .' she was only able to roar, leaning against the wall.

Tomekowa, meanwhile, was cursing and shouting outside the house, and banging her heels against the door.

The spectators stood in little groups, taking counsel with each other, and stamping their feet in the snow. The women looked like red spots dabbed on to the wall; they pressed their knees together, for the wind was penetratingly cold. They murmured remarks to each other from time to time, while they watched the road leading to the church, the spires of which stood out clearly behind the branches of the bare trees. Every minute some one or other wanted to have another look at the corpse; it was a perpetual coming and going. The small yellow flames of the candles could be seen through the half-open door, flaring in the draught, and momentarily revealing a glimpse of the dead man's sharp profile as he lay in the coffin. The smell of burning juniper floated through the air, together with the murmurings of prayers and the grunts of the deaf-mute.

At last the priest arrived with the organist. The white pine coffin was carried out and put into the cart. The women began to sing the usual lamentations, while the procession started down the long village street towards the cemetery.

The priest intoned the first words of the Service for the Dead, walking at the head of the procession with his black biretta on his head; he had thrown a thick fur cloak over his surplice; the wind made the ends of his stole flutter; the words of the Latin hymn fell from his lips at intervals, dully, as though they had been frozen; he looked bored and impatient, and let his eyes wander into the distance. The wind tugged at the black banner, and the pictures of heaven and hell on it wobbled and fluttered to and fro, as though anxious to display themselves to the rows of cottages on either side, where women with shawls over their heads and bare-headed men were standing huddled together.

They bowed reverently, made the sign of the cross, and beat their breasts.

The dogs were barking furiously from behind the hedges, some jumped on to the stone walls and broke into long-drawn howls.

Eager little children peeped out from behind the closed windows, beside toothless used-up old people's faces, furrowed as fields in autumn.

A small crowd of boys in linen trousers and blue jackets with brass buttons, their bare feet stuck into wooden sandals, ran behind the priest, staring at the pictures of heaven and hell, and intoning the intervals of the chant with thin, shivering voices: a! o! . . . They kept it up as long as the organist did not change the chant.

Ignatz proudly walked in front, holding the banner with one hand and singing the loudest of all. He was flushed with exertion and cold, but he never relaxed, as though eager to show that he alone had a right to sing, because it was his grandfather who was being carried to the grave.

They left the village behind. The wind threw itself upon Antek, whose huge form towered above all the others, and ruffled his hair; but he did not notice the wind, he was entirely taken up with the horses and with steadying the coffin, which was tilting dangerously at every hole in the road.

The two sisters were walking close behind the coffin, murmuring prayers and eyeing each other with furious glances.

'Tsutsu! Go home! . . . Go home at once, you carrion!' One of the mourners pretended to pick up a stone. The dog, who had been following the cart, whined, put her tail between her legs, and fled behind a heap of stones by the roadside; when the procession had moved on a good bit, she ran after it in a semi-circle, and anxiously kept close to the horses, lest she should be prevented again from following.

The Latin chant had come to an end. The women, with shrill voices, began to sing the old hymn: 'He who dwelleth under the protection of the Lord.'

It sounded thin. The blizzard, which was getting up, did not allow the singing to come to much. Twilight was falling.

The wind drove clouds of snow across from the endless, steppe-like plains, dotted here and there with skeleton trees, and lashed the little crowd of human beings as with a whip.

'. . . and loves and keeps with faithful heart His word . . .,' they insisted through the whistling of the tempest and the frequent shouts of Antek, who was getting breathless with cold: 'Woa! woa, my lads!'

Snowdrifts were beginning to form across the

road like huge wedges, starting from behind trees and heaps of stones.

Again and again the singing was interrupted when the people looked round anxiously into the white void: it seemed to be moving when the wind struck it with dull thuds; now it towered in huge walls, now it dissolved like breakers, turned over, and furiously darted sprays of a thousand sharp needles into the faces of the mourners. Many of them returned half-way, fearing an increase of the blizzard, the others hurried on to the cemetery in the greatest haste, almost at a run. They got through the ceremony as fast as they could; the grave was ready, they quickly sang a little more, the priest sprinkled holy water on the coffin; frozen clods of earth and snow rolled down, and the people fled home.

Tomek invited everybody to his house, because 'the reverend Father had said to him, that otherwise the ceremony would doubtless end in an ungodly way at the public-house.'

Antek's answer to the invitation was a curse. The four of them, including Ignatz and the peasant Smoletz, turned into the inn.

They drank four quarts of spirits mixed with fat, ate three pounds of sausages, and talked about the money transaction.

The heat of the room and the spirits soon made Antek very drunk. He stumbled so on the way home that his wife took him firmly under the arm.

Smoletz remained at the inn to drink an extra glass in prospect of the loan, but Ignatz ran home ahead as fast as he could, for he was horribly cold.

'Look here, mother . . .,' said Antek, 'the five acres are mine! aha! mine, do you hear? In the

autumn I shall sow wheat and barley, and in the spring we will plant potatoes . . . mine . . . they are mine ! . . . God is my comfort, sayest thou . . .,' he suddenly began to sing.

The storm was raging and howling.

'Shut up ! You'll fall down, and that will be the end of it.'

'. . . His angel keepeth watch . . .,' he stopped abruptly. The darkness was impenetrable, nothing could be seen at a distance of two feet. The blizzard had reached the highest degree of fury ; whistling and howling on a gigantic scale filled the air, and mountains of snow hurled themselves upon them.

From Tomek's cottage came the sound of funeral chants and loud talking when they passed by.

'These heathen ! These thieves ! You wait, I'll show you my five acres ! Then I shall have ten. You won't lord it over me ! Dogs'-breed . . . aha ! I'll work, I'll slave, but I shall get it, eh, mother ? we will get it, what ?' he hammered his chest with his fist, and rolled his drunken eyes.

He went on like this for a while, but as soon as they reached their home, the woman dragged him into bed, where he fell down like a dead man. But he did not go to sleep yet, for after a time he shouted : 'Ignatz !'

The boy approached, but with caution, for fear of contact with the paternal foot.

'Ignatz, you dead dog ! Ignatz, you shall be first-class peasant, not a beggarly professional man,' he bawled, and brought his fist down on the bedstead.

'The five acres are mine, mine ! Foxy Germans,[1] you . . . da . . .' He went to sleep.

[1] The term 'German' is used for 'foreigner' generally, whom the Polish peasant despises.

THE SENTENCE

BY

J. KADEN-BANDROWSKI

'Yakób . . . Yakób . . . Yakób!'

The old man was repeating his name to himself, or rather he was inwardly listening to the sound of it which he had been accustomed to hear for so many years. He had heard it in the stable, in the fields, and on the grazing-ground, on the steps of the manor-house and at the Jew's, but never like this. It seemed to issue from unknown depths, summoning sounds never heard before, sights never yet seen, producing a confusion which he had never experienced. He saw it, felt it everywhere; it was itself the cause of a hopeless despair.

This despair crept silently into Yakób's fatalistic and submissive soul. He felt it under his hand, as though he were holding another hand. He was as conscious of it as of his hairy chest, his cold and starved body. This despair, moreover, was blended with a kind of patient expectancy which was expressed by the whispering of his pale, trembling lips, the tepid sweat under his armpits, the saliva running into his throat and making his tongue feel rigid like a piece of wood.

This is what happened: he tried to remember how it had all happened.

They had come swarming in from everywhere; they had taken the men away; it was firearms

everywhere . . . everywhere firearms, noise and hubbub. The whole world was pushing, running, sweating or freezing. They arrived from this side or from that; they asked questions, they hunted people down, they followed up a trail, they fought. Of course, one must not betray one's brothers, but then . . . who are one's brothers?

They placed watches in the mountains, in the forests, on the fields; they even drove people into the mountain-passes and told them to hold out at any cost.

Yakób had been sitting in the chimney-corner in the straw and dust, covered with his frozen rags. The wind swept over the mountains and penetrated into the cottage, bringing with it a white covering of hoar-frost; it was sighing eerily in the fields; the fields themselves seemed to flee from it, and to be alive, running away into the distance. The earth in white convulsions besieged the sky, and the sky got entangled in the mountain-forests.

Yakób was looking at the snow which was falling thickly, and tried to penetrate the veil with his eyes. Stronger and faster raged the blizzard. Yakób's stare became vacant under the rumbling of the storm and the driving of the snow; one could not have told whether he was looking with eyes or with lumps of ice.

Shadows were flitting across the snowdrifts. They were the outlines of objects lit up by the fire; they trembled on the window-frames; the fire flickered, and the shadows treacherously caressed the images of saints on the walls. The beam played on the window, threw a red light on the short posts of the railing, and disappeared in pursuit of the wind in the fields.

'Yakób . . . Yakób . . . Yakób!'

And he had really had nothing to do with it! It had all gone against him continuously, pertinaciously, and to no purpose. It had attached itself to him, clung to the dry flour that flew about in atoms in the tin where the bit of cheese also was kept. It had bewitched the creaking of the windows on their hinges; it had stared from the empty seats along the walls.

But he kept on beating his breast. His forehead was wrinkled in dried-up folds, his brows bristled fantastically into shaggy, dirty tufts. His heavy, blunt nose, powdered with hairs at the tip, stood out obstinately between two deep folds on either side. These folds overhung the corners of his mouth, and were joined below the chin by a network of pallid veins. A noise, light as a beetle's wing, came in puffs from the half-open lips; they were swollen and purple like an overgrown bean.

Yakób had been sitting in Turkish fashion, his hands crossed over his chest, breathing forth his misery so quietly that it covered him, together with the hoar-frost, stopped his ears and made the tufts of hair on his chest glitter. He was hugging his sorrow to himself, abandoning the last remnant of hope, and longing for deliverance. Behind the wrinkles of his forehead there swarmed a multitude not so much of pictures as of ghosts of the past, yet vividly present.

At last he got up and sat down on the bench in the chimney-corner, drew a pipe from his trouser-pocket and put it between his teeth, forgetting to light it. He laid his heavy hands round the stem. Beyond the blizzard and the shadow-play of the

flame, there appeared to him the scene of his wife and daughters' flight. He had given up everything he possessed, had taken off his sheepskin, had himself loosened the cow from the post. For a short moment he had caught sight of his wife and daughters again in the distance, tramping through the snow as they passed the cross-roads, then they had been swallowed up in a mass of people, horses, guns, carts, shouts and curses. Since then he had constantly fancied that he was being called, yet he knew that there was no one to call him. His thoughts were entirely absorbed in what he had seen then. With his wife all his possessions had gone. Now there was nothing but silence, surrounding him with a sharp breath of pain and death.

By day and by night Yakób had listened to the shots that struck his cottage and his pear-trees. He chewed a bit of cheese from time to time, and gulped down with it the bitter fear that his cottage might be set on fire.

For here and there, like large red poppies on the snow, the glare of burning homesteads leapt up into the sky.

'Here I am . . . watching,' he said to himself, when he looked at these blood-red graves. He smiled at the sticks of firewood on his hearth, which was the dearest thing on earth to him. The walls of his cottage were one with his inmost being, and every moment when he saw them standing, seemed to him like precious savings which he was putting away. So he watched for several days; the vermin were overrunning the place, and he was becoming desperate. Since mid-day the silence had deepened; the day declined, and there was nothing in the world but solitude and snow.

Yakób went over to the window. The snow was lying deep on the fields, like a shimmering coat of varnish; the world was bathed in the light of a pale, wan moon. The forest-trees stood out here and there in blue points, like teeth. Large and brilliant the stars looked down, and above the milky way, veiled in vapours, hung the sickle of the moon.

While in the immensity of the night cold and glittering worlds were bowing down before the eternal, Yakób looked, and noticed something approaching from the mountains. Along the heights and slopes there was a long chain of lights; it was opening out from the centre into two lines on either side, which looked as though they were lost in the forest. Below them there were confused gleams in the fields, and behind, in the distance, the glow of the burning homesteads.

'They have burned the vicarage,' thought Yakób, and his heart answered: 'and here am I . . . watching.'

He pressed against the window-frame, glued his grey face to the panes and, trembling with cold, sent out an obstinate and hostile glance into space, as though determined to obtain permission to keep his own heritage.

Suddenly he pricked up his ears. Something was approaching from the distance across the forest very cautiously. The snow was creaking under the advancing steps. In the great silence it sounded like the forging of iron. Those were horses' hoofs stamping the snow.

This sound, suppressed as it was, produced in him a peculiar sensation which starts in the head and grips you in the nape of the neck.

the consciousness that someone is hiding close to you.

Yakób stood quite still at the window, not even moving his pipe from one corner of his mouth to the other. Not he himself seemed to be trembling, only his rags.

The door was suddenly thrown open and a soldier appeared on the threshold. The light of a lantern which was suspended on his chest, filled the room.

Yakób's blood was freezing. Cossacks, hairy like bears, were standing in the opening of the door, the snow which covered them was shining like a white flame. In the courtyard there were steaming horses; lanceheads were glittering like reliquaries.

Yakób understood that they were calling him 'old man', and asking him questions. He extended his hands to express that he knew nothing. Some of the Cossacks entered, and made signs to him to make up the fire.

He noticed that they were bringing more horses into the yard, small, shaggy ponies like wolves.

He became calmer, and his fear disappeared; he only remained cautious and observant; everything that happened seemed to take hours, yet he saw it with precision.

'It is cold . . . it is cold!'

He made up the fire for these bandits who stretched themselves on the benches; he felt they were talking and laughing about him, and he turned to them and nodded; he thought it would please them if he showed that he approved of them.

They asked him about God knows what, where they were, and where they were not.

As though he knew!

Then they started all over again, while they

swung their booted legs under the seats. One of them came up to the hearth, and clapped the crouching Yakób on his back for fun, but it hurt. It was a resounding smack. Yakób scratched himself and rumpled his hair, unable to understand.

They boiled water and made tea; a smell of sausages spread about the room. Yakób bit his jaws together and looked at the fire. He sat in his place as though he had been glued to it.

His ears were tingling when he heard the soldiers grinding their teeth on their food, tearing the skin off the sausages and smacking their lips.

A large and painful void was gaping in his inside.

They devoured their food fast and noisily, and an odour of brandy began to fill the room, and contracted Yakób's throat.

He understood that they were inviting him to share the meal, but he felt uneasy about that, and though his stomach seemed to have shrunk, and the sausage-skins and bones which they had thrown away lay quite close to him, he could not make up his mind to move and pick them up.

'Come on!'

The soldier beckoned to him. 'Come here!'

The old man felt that he was weakening, the savoury smell took possession of him.

But 'I shan't go,' he thought. The soldier, gnawing a bone, repeated, 'Come on!'

'I shan't go,' thought Yakób, and spat into the fire, to assure himself that he was not going. All the same . . . the terribly tempting smell made him more and more feeble.

At last two of them got up, took him under the arms, and sat him down between them.

They made signs to him, they held the sausage under his nose ; the tea was steaming, the brandy smelt delicious.

Yakób put his hands on the table, then put them behind him. Black shadows were gesticulating on the walls. He felt unhappy about sharing a meal with people without knowing what they were, never having seen or known them before. They were Russians, thus much he knew. He had a vision of something that happened long ago, he could not distinctly remember what it was, for it happened so very long ago ; his grandfather had come home from the fair that was held in the town, shivering and groaning. There had been outcries and curses.

'They are going to poison me like a dog,' he thought.

The wind was changing and moaning under the roof. The fire flickered up and went down ; the red flame and the darkness were dancing together on the walls. The wan moon was looking in at the window. Yakób was sitting on the bench among the soldiers like his own ghost.

'They are surely going to poison me,' he kept repeating to himself. He was still racking his memory as to what it was that had happened so long ago to his grandfather during the fair, at the inn. God knows what it was . . . who could know anything ?

'They are going to poison me !'

His sides were heaving with his breath, he was trying to breathe carefully, so as not to smell the repast.

The shadows on the walls seemed to jeer at him. The soldiers were beginning to talk thickly ; their

mouths, their fingers were shining with grease. They took off their belts and laid their swords aside. The one next to Yakób put his arm round his neck and whispered in his ear ; his red mouth was quite close ; he passed his hand over Yakób's head, and brought his arm right round his throat. He was young and he was talking of his father.

'Daddy,' he said, and put the sausage between his teeth.

Yakób tried to clench his teeth ; but he bit the sausage at the same time.

'Daddy,' said the young soldier again, holding out the sausage for another bite ; he stroked his head, looked into his eyes, and laughed. Yakób was sorry for himself. Was he to be fed like a half-blind old man ? Couldn't he eat by himself ?

When the soldiers saw that Yakób was eating, they burst into shouts of laughter, and stamped their feet, rattling their spurs.

He knew they were laughing at him, and it made him easier in his mind to see that he was affording them pleasure. He purposely made himself ridiculous with the vague idea that he must do something for them in payment of what they were giving him ; they struck him on the shoulder-blades to see him gasp with his beanlike mouth, and to see the frightened smile run over his face like a flash of lightning.

He ate as though from bravado, but he ate well. They started drinking again. Yakób looked at them with eagerness, his arms folded over his stomach, his head bent forward ; the hairy hand of the captain put the bottle to his mouth.

Now he could laugh his own natural laugh again,

and not only from bravado, for he felt quite happy. His frozen body was getting warmed through.

He felt as if a great danger had irrevocably passed.

Gradually he became garrulous, although they hardly understood what he was talking about: 'Yes, the sausage was good . . . to be sure!' He nodded his head and clicked his tongue; he also approved of the huge chunks of bread, and whenever the bottle was passed round, he put his head on one side and folded his hands, as if he were listening to a sermon. From his neighbour's encircling black sleeve the old face peeped out with equanimity, looking like a withering poppy.

'Daddy,' the loquacious Cossack would say from time to time, and point in the direction of the mountains; tears were standing in his eyes.

Yakób put his swollen hand on his, and waited for him to say more.

The soldier held his hand, pointed in the direction of the mountains again, and sniffled.

'He respects old age . . . they are human, there 's no denying it,' thought Yakób, and got up to put more wood on the fire.

They seized hold of him, they would not allow him to do it. A young soldier jumped up: 'Sit down, you are old.'

Yakób held out his empty pipe, and the captain himself filled it.

So there he sat, among these armed bandits. They were dressed in sheepskins and warm materials, had sheepskin caps on their heads; there was he with his bare arms, in well-worn grey trousers, his shirt fastened together at the neck with a piece of wood. Sitting among them,

defenceless as a centipede, without anyone belonging to him, puffing clouds of smoke, he inwardly blessed this adventure, in which everything had turned out so well. The Cossacks looked at the fire, and they too said : ' This is very nice, very nice.'

To whom would not a blazing fire on a cold winter's night appeal ?

They got more and more talkative and asked : ' Where are your wife and children ? ' They probably too had wives and children !

' My wife,' he said, ' has gone down to the village, she was afraid.' They laughed and tapped their chests : ' War is a bad thing, who would not be afraid ? ' Yakób assented all the more readily as he felt that for him the worst was over.

' Do you know the way to the village ? ' suddenly asked the captain. He was almost hidden in clouds of tobacco-smoke, but in his eyes there was a gleam, hard and sinister, like a bullet in a puff of smoke.

Yakób did not answer. How should he not know the way ?

They started getting up, buckled on their belts and swords.

Yakób jumped up to give them the rest of the sausages and food which had been left on the plates. But they would only take the brandy, and left the tobacco and the broken meat.

' That will be for you . . . afterwards,' said the young Cossack, took a red muffler off his neck and put it round Yakób's shoulder.

' That will keep you warm.'

Yakób laughed back at him, and submitted to having the muffler knotted tightly round his throat. The young soldier drew a pair of trousers from his

kitbag : ' Those will keep you warm, you are old.' He told him a long story about the trousers; they had belonged to his brother who had been killed.

' You know, it 's lucky to wear things like that. Poor old fellow ! '

Yakób stood and looked at the breeches. In the fire-light they seemed to be trembling like feeble and stricken legs. He laid his hand on them and smiled, a little defiant and a little touched.

' You may have them, you may have them,' grunted the captain, and insisted on his putting them on at once.

When he had put them on in the chimney-corner and showed himself, they were all doubled up with laughter. He looked appalling in the black trousers which were much too large for him, a grey hood and the red muffler. His head wobbled above the red line as if it had been fixed on a bleeding neck. The rags on his chest showed the thin, hairy body, the stiff folds of the breeches produced an effect as if he were not walking on the ground but floating above it.

The captain gave the command, the soldiers jumped up and looked once more round the cottage; the young Cossack put the sausage and meat in a heap and covered it with a piece of bread. ' For you,' he said once more, and they turned to leave.

Yakób went out with them to bid them God-speed. A vague presentiment seized him on the threshold, when he looked out at the frozen world, the stars, like nails fixed into the sky, and the light of the moon on everything. He was afraid.

The men went up to their horses, and he saw that

there were others outside. The wind ruffled the shaggy little ponies' manes and threw snow upon them. The horses, restless, began to bite each other, and the Cossacks, scattered on the snow like juniper-bushes, reined them in.

The cottage-door remained open. The lucky horseshoe, nailed to the threshold, glittered in the light of the hearth, which threw blood-red streaks between the legs of the table, across the door and beyond it on to the snow.

'I wonder whether they will ever return to their families?' he thought, and: 'How queer it is that one should meet people like that.'

He was sorry for them.

The captain touched his arm and asked the way.

'Straight on.'

'Far?'

'No, not far, not at all far.'

'Where is it?'

The little group stood in front of him by the side of their wolf-like ponies. He drew back into the cottage.

The thought confusedly crossed his mind: 'After all, we did sit together and ate together, two and two, like friends.'

He began hurriedly, 'Turn to the left at the cross-roads, then across the fields as far as Gregor's cottage . . .'

The captain made a sign that he did not understand.

He thought: 'Perhaps they will lose their way and make a fuss; then they will come back to the cottage and eat the meat. I will go with them as far as the cross-roads.'

They crept down the road, passed the clump of

pine-trees which came out in a point beside the brook, and went along the valley on the slippery stones. A large block of ice lay across the brook, shaped like a silver plough ; the waves surrounded it as with golden crescents. The snow creaked under the soldiers' feet. Yakób walked beside them on his sandals, like a silent ghost.

'Now keep straight on as far as the cross,' he said, pointing to a dark object with a long shadow.

'I can't see anything,' said the captain.

He accompanied them as far as the cross, by the side of which stood a little shrine ; the wan saint was wearing a crown of icicles.

From that point the village could be seen across the fields. Yakób discovered that the chain of lights which he had observed earlier in the evening, had come down from the mountains, for it now seemed to be close to the village.

Silence reigned in the sleeping world, every step could be heard.

This silence filled Yakób's heart with a wild fear ; he turned round with a feeling of helplessness and looked back at his cottage. Probably the fire was now going out ; a red glow appeared and disappeared on the windows.

Beyond the cross the road lay through low-lying ground, and was crossed by another road which led abruptly downwards into fields.

Yakób hesitated.

'Come on, old man, come on,' they called to him, and walked on without waiting for his answer.

The Cossacks dug their heels into the rugged ice of the road, and tumbled about in all directions. They had left their horses at the cross-roads. Each one kept a close hold on his gun, so that there

should be no noise. They were whispering to each other; it sounded as if a congregation were murmuring their prayers. Yakób led them, and mentally he held fast to every bush, every lump of ice, saying to himself at every step that now he was going to leave them, they could not miss the road now. But he was afraid.

They no longer whispered, they had become taciturn as they pushed onwards, stumbling, breathing hard.

'As far as Gregor's cottage, and then no more!'

The effect of the drink was passing off. He rubbed his eyes, drew his rags across his chest. 'What was he doing, leading these people about on this night?'

He suddenly stopped where the field-road crossed theirs; the soldiers in front and behind threw themselves down. It was as if the ground had swallowed them.

A black horse was standing in the middle of the road, with extended nostrils. Its black mane, covered with hoar-frost, was tossed about its head; the saddle-bags, which were fur-lined, swung in the breeze; large dark drops were falling from its leg to the ground.

'Damn it!' cursed the captain.

The horse looked meekly at them, and stretched its head forward submissively. Yakób was sorry for the creature; perhaps one could do something for it. He stood still beside it, and again pointed out the road.

'I have done enough, I shan't go any further!' He scratched his head and smiled, thinking that this was a good opportunity for escape.

'Come on,' hissed the captain so venomously in his ear that he marched forward without delay; they followed.

A dull fear mixed with resentment gripped him with terrible force. He now ran at the head like a sheep worried by watch-dogs.

They stopped in front of the cottage, silent, breathless, expectant.

Yakób looked at his companions with boundless astonishment. Their faces under their fur-caps had a tense, cruel look, their brows were wrinkled, their eyes glittered.

From all sides other Cossacks were advancing.

He noticed only now that there were some lying concealed behind the fence on the straw in a confused mass.

He shuddered; thick drops of perspiration stood on his forehead. The beating of his heart filled his head like the noise of a hammer, it seemed to fill everything. In spite of the feeling that he was being forced to do this thing, he again heard the voice calling: 'Yakób, Yakób!'

Up the hillock where Gregor's cottage stood, they advanced on all fours.

He clambered upwards, thinking of his wife, and of the cow he had loosed. Fear veiled his eyes, he saw black spots dancing.

Gregor's cottage was empty as a graveyard. It had been abandoned; the open doors creaked on their hinges. Under the window stood a cradle, covered with snow.

Silently the soldiers surrounded the cottage, and Yakób went with them, as though mesmerized by terror, mute and miserable.

They had hardly got round, when a red glow shot

up from the other side of the village. The soldiers threw themselves down in the snow.

The thundering of guns began on all sides; blood-red lights came flying overhead. An appalling noise broke out, reinforced by the echo from the mountains, as though the whole world were going to perish. The Cossacks advanced, trembling.

Yakób advanced with them, for the captain had hit him across the head. He saw stars when he received the blow, gesticulated wildly, and staggered along the road.

He could distinguish the road running out from the forest like a silver thread. As they advanced, they came under a diabolically heavy rifle fire; bullets were raining upon them from all sides.

Here and there he heard moans already, when one of the soldiers fell bleeding on the snow. Close to him fell the young Cossack who had given him the muffler and breeches. He held out his hand, groaning. Yakób wanted to stop, but the captain would not let him, but rapped him over the head again with his knuckles.

The soldiers lay in heaps. The rest wavered, fell back, hid in the ditch or threw themselves down. The rifle-fire came nearer, the outlines and faces of the advancing enemy could already be distinguished. Another blow on the head stretched Yakób to the ground, and he feigned death. The Cossacks retreated, the others advanced, and he understood that they belonged to his friends.

When he got up, he was immediately surrounded by them, taken by the scruff of the neck and so violently shaken, that he tumbled on his knees.

Gunfire was roaring from the mountains,

shadows of soldiers flitted past him, the wounded Cossacks groaned in the snow. Young, well-nourished looking men were bending over him. Looking up into their faces, he crossed his hands over his chest and laughed joyfully.

'Ah, those Russians, those Russians . . . the villains!' he croaked, 'aho, aho, ho hurlai!' He rolled his tear-filled eyes.

Things were happening thick and fast. From where the chimney stood close to the water, near the manor-house, the village was burning. He could feel the heat and soot and hear the shouting of the crowd through the noise of the gunfire. Now he would see his wife and children again, the friendly soldiers surely had saved them. The young Cossack was still struggling on the ground; now he stretched himself out for his eternal sleep.

'Ah, the villains!' Yakób repeated; the great happiness which filled his heart rushed to his lips in incoherent babblings. 'The villains, they have served me nicely!'

He felt his bleeding head, crouched on his heels and got up. The fleshy red faces were still passing close to him, breathing harder and harder. Fear rose and fell in him like the flames of the burning village; again everything was swallowed up in indescribable noise.

Suddenly Yakób began to sob; he threw himself down at the soldiers' feet and wept bitterly, as though he would weep out his soul and the marrow of his bones.

They lifted him up, almost unconscious, and took him along the high road, under escort with fixed bayonets. His tears fell fast upon the snow, and thus he came into his own village, among his

own people, pale as a corpse, with poison in his heart.'

He looked dully at the blazing wooden church-spire where it stood enveloped in flames as though wrapped in an inflated glittering cloak. Dully he let his eyes wander over the hedges and fences; everything seemed unreal, as things seen across a distant wave or a downpour of rain, out of reach and strange.

He was standing where the field-path joined the high road. The soldiers sat down on a heap of stones and lighted their cigarettes.

Yakób, trembling all over, looked at his own black shadow; fugitives arrived from the burning village and swarmed past him; the rifle fire now sounded from the direction of the mountains.

Suddenly Gregor's cottage burst into flames. A blood-red glow inflated the clouds of smoke, trembled on the snow and ran over the pine-trees like gold.

Soldiers were arriving from that direction, streaming with blood, supported by their comrades.

Yakób stood motionless, looking at his shadow; fear was burning within him. He looked at the sky above the awful chaos on the earth, and became calmer. He tried to remember how it had all happened.

They had come, had given him food. His wife and children were probably safe in the manor-house. Blinking his swollen eyelids, he tried to deceive himself, crouched down near the guard who was smoking, and asked him for fire. His fear miraculously disappeared.

He began to talk rapidly to the soldier: 'I was sitting . . . the wind was moaning . . .' he told

him circumstantially how he was sitting, what he had been thinking, how the shots had struck his cottage.

The soldier put his rifle between his knees, crossed his hands over his sleeves, spat out and sighed.

'But you have had underhand dealings with the Russians.'

'No . . . no.'

'Tell that to another.'

'I shall,' replied Yakób calmly.

'And who showed them the way?'

'Who?' said Yakób.

'Who showed them the way over here? Or did they find it on the map?'

'Yes, on the map,' assented Yakób, as though he were quite convinced.

'Well, who did?' said the soldier, wagging his head.

'Who?' repeated Yakób like an echo.

'I suppose it wasn't I?' said the soldier.

'I?' asked Yakób.

The other three soldiers approached inquisitively to where Yakób was crouching.

'A nice mess you've made,' one of them said, pointing to the wounded who were arriving across the fields. 'Do you understand?'

Yakób fixed his eyes on the soldiers' boots, and would not look in that direction. But he could not understand what it all meant . . . all this noise, and the firing that ran from hill to hill.

'Nice mess this you've made, old man.'

'Yes.'

'You!'

Yakób looked up at them, and had the sensation

of being deep down at the bottom of a well instead of crouching at their feet.

'That is a lie, a lie, a lie!' he cried, beating his chest; his hair stood on end. The soldiers sat down in a row on the stones. They were young, cold, tired.

'But now they'll play the deuce with you.'

'Why?' said Yakób softly, glancing sideways at them.

'You're an old ass,' remarked one of them.

'But,' he began again, 'I was sitting, looking at the snow. . . .'

He had a great longing to talk to them, they looked as if they would understand, although they were so young.

'I was sitting . . . give me some fire . . . do you come from these parts yourselves?'

They did not answer.

He thought of his cottage, the bread and sausage, the black horse at the cross-roads.

'They beat me,' he sobbed, covering his face with his rags.

The soldiers shrugged their shoulders: 'Why did you let them?'

'O . . . o . . . o!' cried the old man. But tears would no longer wash away a conviction which was taking possession of him, searing his soul as the flames seared the pines.

'Why did you let them? Aren't you ashamed of yourself?'

No, he was not ashamed of himself for that. But that he had shown them the way . . . the way they had come by . . . what did it all mean? All his tears would not wash away this conviction: that he had shown them the way . . . the way they had come by.

Guns were thundering from the hills, the village was burning, the mill was burning . . . a black mass of people was surrounding him. More and more wounded came in from the fields, covered with grey mud. The flying sparks from the mill fell at his feet.

A detachment of soldiers was returning.

'Get up, old man,' cried his guard; 'we're off!'

Yakób jumped to his feet, hitched up his trousers, and went off perplexed, under cover of four bayonets that seemed to carry a piece of sky between them like a starred canopy.

His fear grew as he approached the village. He did not see the familiar cottages and hedges; he felt as though he were moving onwards without a goal. Moving onwards and yet not getting any farther. Moving onwards and yet hoping not to get to the end of the journey.

He sucked his pipe and paid no attention to anything; but the village was on his conscience.

The fear which filled his heart was not like that which he had felt when the Cossacks arrived, but a senseless fear, depriving him of sight and hearing . . . as though there were no place for him in the world.

'Are we going too fast?' asked the guard, hearing Yakób's heavy breathing.

'All right, all right,' he answered cheerfully. The friendly words had taken his fear away.

'Take it easy,' said the soldier. 'We will go more slowly. Here 's a dry cigarette, smoke.'

Without turning round, he offered Yakób a cigarette, which he put behind his ear.

They entered the village. It smelt of burning, like a gipsy camp. The road seemed to waver in

the flickering of the flames, the wind howled in the timber.

Yakób looked at the sky. Darkness and stars melted into one.

He would not look at the village. He knew there were only women and children in the cottages, the men had all gone. This thought was a relief to him, he hardly knew why.

Meanwhile the detachment of soldiers, instead of going to the manor-house, had turned down a narrow road which led to the mill. They stopped and formed fours. Every stone here was familiar to Yakób, and yet, standing in the snow up to his knees, he was puzzled as to where he was. If he could only sleep off this nightmare . . . he did not recognize the road . . . the night was far advanced, and the village not asleep as usual . . . if they would only let him go home!

He would return to-morrow.

The mill was burning out. Cinders were flying across from the granaries; the smoke bit into the eyes of the people who were standing about looking upwards, with their arms crossed.

Everything showed up brilliantly in the glare; the water was dripping from rung to rung of the silent wheel, and mixed its sound with that of the fire.

The adjoining buildings were fenced round with a small running fire; smoke whirled round the tumbling roof like a shock of hair shot through with flames. The faces of the bystanders assumed a metallic glow.

The wails of the miller and his family could be heard through the noise of battle, of water, and of fire.

It was as if the crumbling walls, the melting joints, the smoke, the cries were dripping down the wheel, transformed into blood, and were carried down by the black waves and swallowed up in the infinite abyss of the night.

'They beat me. . . .' Yakób justified himself to himself, when the tears rose to his eyes again. No tears could wash away the conviction that it was he who had shown them the way by which they had come.

The first detachment was waiting for the arrival of the second. It arrived, bringing in prisoners, Cossacks. A large number of them were being marched along; they did not walk in order but irregularly, like tired peasants. They were laughing, smoking cigarettes, and pushing against each other. Among them were those who had come to his cottage; he recognized the captain and others.

When they saw Yakób they waved their hands cordially and called out to him, 'Old man, old man!'

Yakób did not reply; he shrunk into himself. Shame filled his soul. He looked at them vacantly. His forehead was wrinkled as with a great effort to remember something, but he could think of nothing but a huge millwheel turning under red, smooth waves. Suddenly he remembered: it was the young Cossack who had given him his brother's clothes.

'The other one,' he shouted, pointing to his muffler, 'where did you leave him?'

Soldiers came between them and pushed the crowd away.

There was a terrific crash in the mill; a thick red cloud rushed upwards, dotted with sparks. Under this cloud an ever-increasing mass of people was flocking towards the spot where Yakób was;

they were murmuring, pulling the soldiers by their cloaks. Women, children, and old men pressed in a circle round him, gesticulating, shouting: 'It was he . . . he . . . he!'

Words were lost in the chaos of sounds, faces became merely a dense mass, above which fists were flung upwards like stones.

Yakób tripped about among the soldiers like a fawn in a cage, raised and lowered his head, and clutched his rags; he could not shut his quivering mouth, and from his breast came a cry like the sob of a child.

The crowd turned upon him with fists and nails; he hid his face in his rags, stopped his ears with his fingers, and shook his head.

The prisoners had been dispatched, and it was Yakób's turn to be taken before the officer in command of the battalion.

'Say that I . . . that I . . .' Yakób entreated his guard.

'What are you in such a hurry for?'

'Say that I . . .'

The soldiers were sitting round a camp-fire, piling up the faggots. Soup was boiling in a cauldron.

'Say that I . . . ' he begged again, standing in the thick smoke.

At last he was taken into the school-house.

The officer in command stood in the middle of the room with a cigarette between his fingers.

'I . . . I . . . ' groaned Yakób, already in the door. His dishevelled hair made him look like a sea-urchin; his face was quite disfigured with black marks of violence; behind his bleeding left ear still stuck the cigarette. His swollen upper lip was

drawn sideways and gave him the expression of a ghastly smile. His eyes looked out helpless, dispirited, from his swollen lids.

'What do you want to say?' asked the officer, without looking at him. Something suddenly came over him.

'It was I,' he said hoarsely.

The soldier made his report.

'They gave me food,' Yakób said, 'and this muffler and breeches, and they beat me.'

'It was you who showed them the way?'

'It was.'

'You did show them the way?'

He nodded.

'Did they beat you in the cottage?'

Yakób hesitated. 'In the cottage we were having supper.'

'They beat you afterwards, on the way?'

He again hesitated, and looked into the officer's eyes. They were clear, calm eyes. The guard came a step nearer.

The officer looked down, turned towards the window and asked more gently: 'You had supper together in the cottage. Then you went out with them. Did they beat you on the way?'

He turned suddenly and looked at Yakób. The peasant stood, looked at the grey snowflakes outside the window, and his face, partly black, partly pallid, was wrinkled in deep folds.

'Well, what have you got to say?'

'It was I . . .' This interrogation made him alternately hot and cold.

'You who beat them, and not they who beat you?' laughed the officer.

'The meat is still there in the cottage, and here

is what they gave me,' he said, holding up the muffler and tobacco.

The officer threw his cigarette away and turned on his heel. Yakób's eyes became dull, his arm with the muffler dropped.

The officer wrote an order. 'Take him away.'

They passed the schoolmaster and some women and soldiers in the passage.

'Well . . . well . . . ' they whispered, leaning against the wall.

The guard made a sign with his hand. Yakób, behind him, looked dully into the startled faces of the bystanders.

'How frightened he looks . . . how they have beaten him . . . how frightened he looks!' they murmured.

He put the muffler round his neck again, for he felt cold.

'That 's him, that 's him,' growled the crowd outside.

The manor-house was reached. The light from the numerous windows fell upon horses and gun-carriages drawn up in the yard.

'What do you want?' cried the sentry to the crowd, pushing them back.

He nodded towards Yakób. 'Where is he to go?'

'That sort . . .' murmured the crowd. Yakób's guard delivered his order. They stopped in the porch. The pillars threw long shadows which lost themselves towards the fence and across the waves of the stream beyond, in the darkness of the night

The heat in the waiting-room was overpowering This was the room where the bailiff had so often given him his pay. The office no longer existed. Soldiers were lying asleep everywhere.

They passed on into a brilliantly lighted room. The staff was quartered there. The general took a few steps across the room, murmured something and stood still in front of Yakób.

'Ah, that is the man?' he turned and looked at Yakób with his blue eyes that shot glances quick as lightning from under bushy grey eyebrows.

'It was I,' ejaculated Yakób hoarsely.

'It was you who showed them the way?'

Yakób became calmer. He felt he would be able to make himself more quickly understood here. 'It was.'

'You brought them here?'

'Yes.'

He passed his hand over his hair and shrank into himself again. He looked at the brilliant lights.

'Do you know what is the punishment for that?'

The general came a step nearer; Yakób felt overawed by the feeling of strength and power that emanated from him. He was choking. Yes, he understood and yet did not understand.

'What have you got to say for yourself!'

'We had supper together . . .' he began, but stopped, for the general frowned and eyed him coldly. Yakób looked towards the window and listened to hear the sound of wind and waves. The general was still looking at him, and so they stood for a moment which seemed an eternity to Yakób, the man in the field-grey uniform who looked as if he had been sculptured in stone, and the quailing, shrunken, shivering form, covered with dirt and rags. Yakób felt as though a heavy weight were resting on him. Then both silently looked down.

'Take him back to the battalion.'

The steely sound of the command moved something in the souls of the soldiers, and took the enjoyment of their sleep from them.

They returned to the school-house. The crowd, as though following a thief caught in the act, ran by their side again.

They found room for the old man in a shed, some one threw him a blanket. Soldiers were sleeping in serried ranks. Their heavy breathing mixed with the sound of wind and waves, and the cold blue light of the moon embraced everything.

Yakób buried himself in the straw, looked out through a hole in the boarding and wept bitterly.

'What are you crying for?' asked the sentry outside, and tapped his shoulder with his gun.

Yakób did not answer.

'Thinking of your wife?' the soldier gossiped, walking up and down outside the shed. 'You're old, what good is your wife to you?' The soldier stopped and stretched his arms till the joints cracked.

'Or your children? Never mind, they'll get on in the world without a helpless old man like you.'

Yakób was silent, and the soldier crouched down near him.

'Old man, you ought . . .'

'No . . .' tremblingly came from the inside.

'You see,' the soldier paced up and down again, 'you are thinking of your cottage. I can understand that. But do you think the cottage will be any the worse off for your death?'

The soldier's simple and dour words outside in the blue night, his talk of Yakób's death, of his own death which might come at any moment, slowly brought sleep to Yakób.

In the morning he awoke with a start. The sun was shining on the snow, the mountains glittered like glass. The trees on the slopes were covered with millions of shining crystals; freshness floated between heaven and earth. Yakób stepped out of the shed, greeted the sentry and sat down on the boards, blinking his eyes.

The air was fresh and cold, tiny atoms of hoar-frost were flying about. Yakób felt the sun's warmth thawing his limbs, caressing him. He let himself be absorbed into the pure, rosy morning.

Doors creaked, and voices rang out clear and fresh. Opposite to him a squadron of Uhlans were waiting at the farrier's, who came out, black as a charcoal-burner, and chatted with them. They were laughing, their eyes shone. From inside the forge the hammer rang out like a bell. Yakób held his head in his hand and listened. At each stroke he shut his eyes. The soldiers brought him a cup of hot coffee; he drank it and lighted his pipe.

The murmuring of the brook, punctuated by the hammer-strokes, stimulated his thoughts till they became clearer, limpid as the stream.

'It was I . . . it was I . . .' he silently confided to all the fresh voices of the morning.

The guard again took him away with fixed bayonets. He knew where he was going. They would go through the village and stop at the wall of the cemetery.

The sky was becoming overcast, the beauty of the morning was waning. They called at the school-house for orders. Yakób remained outside the open window.

'I won't . . .' he heard a voice.

'Nor I . . .' another.

Yakób leant against the fence, supported his temples on his fists and watched the snow-clouds and mists.

A feeling of immense, heavy weariness came over him, and made him limp. He could see the ruins of the mill, the tumbled-down granaries, the broken doors. The water trickled down the wheel; smoke and soot were floating on the water, yet the water flowed on.

Guilty . . . not guilty. . . . What did it all matter?

'Do you hear?' he asked of the water. 'Do you hear?' he asked of his wife and children and his little property.

They took him here and they took him there. They made him wait outside houses, and he sat down on the steps as if he had never been used to anything else. He picked up a dry branch and gently tapped the snow with it and waited. He waited as in a dream, going round and round the wish that it might all be over soon.

While he was waiting, the crowd amused themselves with shaking their fists at him; he was thankful that his wife seemed to have gone away to the town and did not see him.

At last his guard went off in a bad temper. A soldier on horseback remained with him.

'Come on, old man,' he said, 'no one will have anything to do with it.'

Yakób glanced at him; the soldier and his horse seemed to be towering above the cottages, above the trees of the park with their flocks of circling crows. He looked into the far distance.

'It was I.'

'You're going begging, old man.'

Again they began their round, and behind them followed the miller's wife and other women. His legs were giving way, as though they were rushes. He took off his cap and gave a tired look in the direction of his cottage.

At last they joined a detachment which was starting off on the old road. They went as far as Gregor's cottage, then to the cross-roads, and in single file down the path. From time to time isolated gunshots rang out.

They sat down by the side of a ditch.

'We've got to finish this business,' said the sergeant, and scratched his head. 'No one would come forward voluntarily . . . I have been ordered. . . .'

The soldiers looked embarrassed and drew away, looking at Yakób.

He hid his head between his knees, and his thoughts dwelt on everything, sky, water, mountains, fire.

His heart was breaking; a terrible sweat stood on his brows.

Shots rang out.

A deep groan escaped from Yakób's breast, a groan like a winter-wind. He sprang up, stood on the edge of the ditch, sighed with all the strength of his old breast and fell like a branch.

Puffs of smoke rose from the ditch and from the forests.

'P. P. C.'

(A Lady's Narrative)

[An incident during the early part of the World War, when the Russians, retreating before the victorious Austro-German armies, destroyed everything.]

BY

MME RYGIER-NAŁKOWSKA

I

At the time when the bridges over the Vistula still existed, connecting by stone and iron the banks of the town now split in two, I drove to the opposite side of the river into the country to my abandoned home, for I thought I might still succeed in transporting to the town the rest of the articles I had left behind, and so preserve them from a doubtful fate.

I was specially anxious to bring back the cases full of books that had been early packed and duly placed in a garret. They included one part of the library that had long ago been removed, but owing to their considerable weight they had been passed over in the hurry of the first removal.

The house had been locked up and entrusted to the sure care of Martin, an old fellow bent half to the ground, who with his wife also kept an eye on the rest of the buildings, the garden, and the forest.

When I arrived I found the whole of my wild, forgotten forest-world absolutely changed and

transformed into one great camp. But the empty wood was moving like a living thing, like the menacing 'Birnam wood' before the eyes of Macbeth. It was full of an army, with each of their handsome big horses tied to a pine in the forest. Farther off across the roots could be seen small grey tents stretched on logs. Most of the exhausted blackened men were lying all over the ground and sleeping among the quiet beasts. Along the peaceful, silky forest paths, in a continuous line, like automobiles in the Monte Pincio park, stood small field kitchens on wheels, gunpowder boxes, and carts.

At the foot of the forest, on the flowery meadow, unmown this year, were feeding pretty Ukraine cattle driven from some distant place. Quiet little sheep, not brought up in our country, were eating grass on a neighbouring hillock.

Martin's bent figure was hastily coming along the road from the house, making unintelligible signs. When he was quite close he explained in a low discontented voice, and as if washing his hands of all responsibility, that I had been robbed. 'I was going round,' he said, 'this very morning, as it was my duty to do. There was no one to be seen. Now the whole forest is full of soldiers. They came, opened the house, and stole absolutely everything. My wife came upon them as they were going out!'

'What? Stole everything?' I asked.

Martin was silent a moment; at last he said: 'Well, for instance, the samovar; absolutely everything!'

I found the front door, in fact, wide open, and in it Martin's wife, with gloom depicted on her

face. The floors were covered with articles dragged out of the drawers in the rooms on the upper floor. In the garrets scores of books in the most appalling disorder were scattered from out of parcels and boxes. Unbound volumes had been shaken, so that single sheets and maps were found in various places or not found at all.

I went into the veranda. In the green of the astonished garden, now paling in the dusk, men were sleeping here and there. There was a specially large swarm in the part of the garden where ripe raspberries were growing. Nearer the house, under a shady d'Amarlis pear tree, four soldiers were lying and playing at cards. They all had attached to their caps masks to protect them from poison-gas with two thick glasses for the eyes, and with this second great pair of eyes on them their heads looked like those of certain worms. In the packs of cards I recognized without trouble some that used to lie by our fire-place. I went up to the soldiers and pointed out that they had plundered my house, and that I missed several things, and was anxious to find them, especially women's dresses not of use to any one there, and that I wanted to be assured that no one would come into the house in future—at least till I had packed afresh the damaged books and collected what remained.

I could speak freely, for none of them so much as thought of interrupting me. Then I was silent, whereupon the soldier lying nearest raised his head —the movement put me in mind of a hydrostatic balance—gave me a long look and said: 'What have we to do with your books? We don't even understand your language!' Then, looking at me

amiably with his double pair of eyes, he took a bite of a half-ripe pear as green as a cucumber.

'Nothing to be got here: you must go to an officer,' Martin advised, as he stood a little to the side of me.

The officers had their quarters about a quarter of a mile away, in a small house near the forest path. The mist passed off, and in the darkness in the middle of the wood a number of fires shone. One could hear a confused noise, unknown soldiers' songs, and mournful music. We soon reached our destination. We were asked to go into the nearly empty room, where there was a murmur of voices of soldiers; they were all standing. At a long table, by the light of a small candle without a candlestick, two men were writing something, and one was dipping in a plate proofs of photographs. Some one asked if I felt any fear, and when I hastened to reassure him entirely, he gave me a chair. Martin stood, doubled up, at the door.

A moment later a young officer, informed by a soldier of my arrival, came down from above, clapped his spurs together in a salute and inquired what I wanted. When he heard my business his brow darkened and he became severe. 'Till now we have had no instance of such an occurrence,' he informed me with much dignity, and his voice sounded sincere. 'Where is the place?' he asked. 'At the end of the wood?'

'Quite right,' I answered.

'Ah, then, it is not our soldiers,' he said with relief; 'there is a detachment of machine gunners there, and they have no officers at all.'

He expressed a wish, in spite of the lateness of the hour, to examine the damage personally with

two other officers. They assured me that the things were bound to be found, and punishment would fall on the guilty under the severe military law.

We all walked back through the camp by a forest track which I had known from childhood as well as the paths of my own garden. The mist had thickened, the fires seemed veiled as with cobwebs. Everywhere around horses were eating hay and scraping up the ground solid with pine-tree roots. Songs ended in silence and began again farther off.

On the way I explained directly to the officers that my special object was not to get back the things or to punish the thieves, and certainly not according to 'the severe military law'. How was I to trace the thieves? My watchman would certainly not recognize them, because he was not familiar with shoulder straps, and would say that in that respect all soldiers were alike. I was only afraid of further damage in the house, its locks being rotten, and what I desired was that in case the army stayed there, a guard should be appointed.

So we reached the house. Martin conducted the gentlemen through the rooms, and by the light of a candle showed them the condition of things. The officers, with obvious annoyance, discovered a 'veritable *pogrom*'. They could not be expected to understand what the loss incurred by the scattering of so many books meant to me; one of them smelt of English 'Sweet Pea' perfume, like a bouquet of flowers. Yet they clinked their spurs together, and as they went out they again apologized for the injury done and appointed a sentry, who went on guard at midnight.

II

Day came full of clouds that hung right over the tops of the trees, full of wind and cold, but dry—quite a genuine summer day.

Round the house from early morning soldiers were moving about, mitigating the weariness of the man on guard. Now one, now another wanted to see how the pillaged house looked. Quite simply they walked through the open door into the interior, finishing what remained of the unripe apples they had picked in the garden. One stood still on the threshold, put his hand to his cap, bowed, and duly asked, 'if the lady would allow?'

Then he entered, stooped, and picked up two books from the ground. 'May I be permitted to take the liberty of asking to whom these books belong? What is the reason for their exceedingly great number? Do they serve a special department of study?' He made his inquiries in such a stilted way that I was forced laboriously to keep my answers on the same level. He owned he would be happy if I would agree that he should help in the work, for he had not had a book in his hand for a year. He therefore stayed in the garret and with the anxiety of a genuine bibliomaniac collected volumes of similar size and shape, put together scattered maps and tied up bundles. Martin looked distrustfully at this assistant, and annoyance was depicted on the face of Martin's wife.

In front of the house one of the soldiers had brought cigarettes to the man on guard. Another turned to him ironically: 'Well, under the circumstances I suppose you are going to light one?'

'You are not allowed to light a cigarette on guard?'

'It wouldn't be allowed; but perhaps, as there is no officer to see me. . . .'

The speaker was a young, fair-haired, amiable boy, assistant to an engine driver in some small town in Siberia. He was quite ready to relate his history. He could not wonder sufficiently how it came to pass that he was still alive. He had run away from the trenches at S., certain that he would die if he were not taken prisoner. The fire of the enemy was concentrated on their entrenchment, so as to cut off all chance of escape. Every one round him fell, and he was constantly feeling himself to ascertain that he was not wounded. 'You see, lady, when they turn their whole fire on one spot, you must get away; it rains so thick that no one can stand it.'

'Well, and didn't you fire just as thick?'

He looked with amiable wonder. 'When we had nothing to fire?' he said good-humouredly.

Well, somehow it all ended happily. But, then, the others, his companions . . . ah, how dashing they had been, what fellows! An admirable, glorious army, the S. Regiment! Almost everyone was killed; it was sad to see them. Now they had to fill up the gaps with raw recruits; but it was no longer the old army; there will never be such fighting again. . . . It will be hard to discipline them. They had fought continuously for a year. A whole year in the war! They had been close to Drialdow, in Lwow, even close to Cracow itself. 'Do you know Cracow, lady?'

'I do.'

'Well, then, just there, just five miles from

Cracow. The bitter cold of a windy day penetrated to our bones. To think that the town was only five miles off!'

I went away to return to the packing of my books. At the door I noticed a woman standing, a neighbour; she was frightened and timid.

'I suppose they have robbed you, lady?'

'They have.'

'And now they are at it in my place,' she said softly. 'Their cattle have eaten up my whole meadow, and they are tearing up everything in my kitchen-garden. I was looking this morning; not a cucumber left. To-morrow they will begin mowing the oats; the officer gave me an advance in money, and the rest he paid with note of hand. Is it true that they are going to burn everything?'

'I don't know.'

The new watchman came up, young, black-eyed, a gloomy Siberian villager. When he laughed, his teeth shone like claws.

'We have stolen nothing, but we are ordered to do penance,' he said defiantly to Martin. 'Very well, we'll do it. It was worse in the trenches—a great deal worse! Often we were so close to the enemy that we could see them perfectly. We used to take off our caps, raise them in the air; they fired. If they hit, then we waved a white handkerchief: that meant they had made a hit. Later on they would show their caps and we fired.'

'Are you from a distance?' Martin asked.

'From Siberia,' he answered, and turned his head. 'We were four brothers all serving in the army; two still write to me, the fourth is gone. Our

father is an old man, and neither ploughs nor sows. He sold a beautiful colt for 150 roubles, for what is the use of a horse when there is no more farming? God! what a country this is,' he continued with pity. 'With us in Siberia a farmer with no more than ten cows is called poor. We are rich! We have land where wheat grows like anything. Manure we cart away and burn; we've no use for it. Ah! Siberia!'

The woman, my neighbour, sat in silence. It was strange to her to hear of this country as the Promised Land. When she had to go she said, thoughtfully and nervously: 'Of course if I hadn't *sold* him the oats they would have taken them. Even those two roubles on account were better than that.'

I went upstairs again, and by evening the work of packing the books and things was completed.

The soldier who loved books made elaborate remarks on them also to his simple comrades. He spoke about the psychical aspect of fighting, the physiology of heroic deeds, the resignation of those destined for death, &c. He was a thoughtful man and unquestionably sensitive; but all that he said had the stamp of oriental thought, systematically arranged in advance and quite perfectly expressed at the moment, free from the immediate *naïveté* of elementary knowledge.

'Do you belong,' I said, 'to this detachment of machine gunners?'

'Unquestionably; I am, as you see, lady, a simple soldier.'

'I should like to see a machine gun at close quarters. Can I?'

I immediately perceived that I had asked some-

thing out of order. He was confused and turned pale.

'I have never seen a machine gun,' I continued, 'up to now; but, of course, if there are any difficulties. . . .'

'It is not that,' he answered, with hesitation. 'I must tell you honestly, lady, we haven't a single cartridge left.'

He checked himself and was silent; at that moment he did not show the repose of a psychologist.

'Do you understand, lady?'

'I do.'

'And also we have absolutely no officers. There is nothing but what you see there in the forest; the rest are pitiful remnants—some 200 soldiers left out of two regiments.'

Early next day Martin joyously informed me that in the night the soldiers had gone away. They had burnt nothing, but it was likely that another detachment would come in by the evening.

'And the soldier who helped you to pack was here very early. I told him the lady was asleep, so he only left this card.'

It was a visiting card with a bent edge; at the bottom was written, in pencil and in Roman characters,

'p. p. c.'

'Yes, my friend,' I thought to myself, 'that is just the souvenir I should have expected you to leave me after plundering me right and left . . . a "P. P. C." card! And my deliverance from you means destruction to somebody else's woods house, and garden.'

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Selected Polish tales

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